OUTCOMES-BASED ASSESSMENT: NECESSARY EVIL OR TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL?

Vivienne Bozalek

INTRODUCTION

Social work educational providers at higher educational institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have been obliged since 2008 to engage with the South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA's) qualification of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), which was registered in June 2003 in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In February 2004 the South African Social Service Professions Council (SACSSP) wrote a letter to all social work educational providers requesting them to benchmark their current curriculum against the new minimum standard requirements of the BSW on a template. Furthermore, providers of social work education and training had to indicate how they would change their current learning programmes to accommodate the minimum standards, which encompass 27 exit-level outcomes and their associated assessment criteria. Providers had until June 2006 to comply with the requirements of the new BSW qualification and had to start implementation of the learning programme in January 2007.

These national changes in policy have made it important for social work educators in South African HEIs to carefully consider how they will provide learning opportunities for their undergraduate students to attain the BSW outcomes. Furthermore, the alignment of the curriculum across year levels as a collaborative exercise in social work programmes from a programmatic perspective becomes essential to plan for learning opportunities where students will be ultimately able to demonstrate that they are competent in 27 outcomes. In order to engage in such activities, social work educators need to engage with the concepts of outcomes-based education (OBE), which has now become an important component of educational policy in South Africa (Naicker, 2000). These changes require a different way of viewing and practising teaching and learning. Instead of concentrating on inputs or engaging primarily with the content of teaching, educators need to look at the sorts of capabilities which the BSW qualification identifies as important for beginner-level social workers. These capabilities are implicit in the exit-level outcomes and their associated assessment criteria. Social work educators will have to involve themselves in the process of establishing outcomes-based assessment plans and more learner-centred education in order to meet the minimum requirements of both the professional quality assurance body (the SACSSP) as well as the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (HEQC). There has been some literature on how to engage with outcomes-based assessment plans and procedures and with innovative learner-centred education in Social Work and more generally in higher education (Adler & Reed, 2002; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Bous & Falchikov, 2007; Butcher, Davies & Highton, 2006; Carter, 2005; Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Gibbs, 2006).

This paper is a description of my own initial attempts to engage with what I term a "SAQAfication" of the curriculum by focusing on two processes involving outcomes-based education. The first process was my own engagement with how best to incorporate the learning outcomes of the BSW qualification into a new module that related to the theory and practice of social work intervention. It was important for me that the incorporation of the learning outcomes should enhance rather than detract from the process of teaching and learning, and should both inform and improve the relevance of the content of what was taught – particularly

in relation to the application of theory to practice. The second outcomes-based activity with which I engaged was producing a portfolio of assessments on a learner in the module that I taught. University educators at the institution where I teach attended a workshop on how to become a registered assessor for SAQA, which required developing a portfolio of evidence on a particular learner.

Both of these imperatives provided an opportunity for new ways of engaging with curriculum development, teaching, learning and assessment of students. Since I was developing a new module on Advanced Intervention for fourth-year social work students, I decided to use this experience for a dual purpose:

- Firstly, to give the students a theoretical insight into certain of the exit-level outcomes which they were required to apply in their practical placements and demonstrate their competence in them through the development of a practical portfolio;

- Secondly, to ensure that the module was developed in such a way that it met these requirements, for which I myself had to develop a portfolio on a particular learner in order for me to become a registered assessor with SAQA.

In this paper I will describe what I did in order to engage in the process that was required for assessment and in terms of the use and fleshing out of the exit-level outcomes in the module. My major intention in elaborating on this is the hope that this may be of some benefit to others in Social Work Departments at South African HEIs.

With quality assurance now being a requirement at both institutional and programme level, learning programmes will be assessed for their fitness of purpose (are they appropriate for the minimum standards of the qualification?), their fitness for purpose (are they appropriate for the level of the students entering the programme?) and how much value do they add (what will the students gain from their learning?) (Butcher *et al.*, 2006). Social Work and other academics will be required to think carefully about curriculum alignment and how assessment relates to this in order to implement the exit-level outcomes and engage in assessments of their students.[1] After a description of the process I engaged in to implement the exit-level outcomes and plan and conduct assessment of learning, I evaluate the pros and cons of outcomes-based education for the Social Work curriculum.

THE WORKSHOP ON BECOMING AN ACCREDITED ASSESSOR

In order to become a registered assessor with SAQA a workshop run by an independent company was conducted, which I attended with academics from various faculties at our higher educational institution. As part of the requirements to become a SAQA assessor, one was required to develop a portfolio of evidence which was to include the following:

1. The biographical details of the learner who was chosen for the portfolio of evidence on assessment and the reasons for choosing this learner;
2. Selection of the exit-level outcomes and the criteria to be used in the assessment;
3. The pre-assessment interview;

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[1] The HEQC and the CHE have now indicated that it is not necessary for academic staff at higher educational institutions to become registered assessors, although a Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education Teaching (PGDHE) is available to academics who wish to improve their assessment and teaching skills in higher educational institutions in certain provinces.

4. The formative assessment tools and the performance indicators to assess knowledge, skills and attributes required to prove the learner's competent performance;

5. An evaluation of all the evidence according the validity, authenticity, currency, consistency and sufficiency (VACCS) criteria;

6. A report of the feedback given to the learner at feedback sessions;

7. A report on the learner's feedback to the assessor;

8. A review of the assessment information with the view to improving it in future. A record of all learner assessments was also required.

The above information was to be collated into a portfolio using the Unit Standard "Plan and Conduct Assessment of Learning" (ASSMT 01), which is registered on the NQF. According to this unit standard as set out in the SAQA, "people credited with this unit standard are able to assess learner performance against standards and qualifications registered on the NQF" (http://www.saqa.org.za/nsb/sgestds/assessor2.html). It is expected that people who become registered assessors through successfully completing the requirements for this unit standard have a qualification in the field of expertise they will be assessing in – i.e. in this instance, Social Work.

The specific outcomes listed for this unit standard are the following:

Specific outcome 1: Plan and prepare for assessment;
Specific outcome 2: Prepare candidate for assessment;
Specific outcome 3: Conduct assessment;
Specific outcome 4: Evaluate and record evidence and make assessment judgements;
Specific outcome 5: Provide feedback to relevant parties;
Specific outcome 6: Review assessment.

In what follows I will cover the way I attempted to achieve competence in each of these specific outcomes. In particular, I will attempt to outline how I went about constructing the course and planning the assessments so that I would be able to show evidence of these specific outcomes in the portfolio which I compiled. Finally, I will evaluate the pros and cons of engaging in such a process for the social work education and curriculum process.

Planning and preparing for the assessment

As I mentioned previously, in order to conduct the assessment I had to construct a module which would make it possible to conduct an assessment on a learner in the way that was required by the Assessor Training Workshop. I was able to utilise certain exit-level outcomes of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and their associated assessment criteria as guides to develop the content of the module and the assessment exercises which would give students opportunities to show that they were competent in relation to specific outcomes.

Developing the module on Advanced Social Work Intervention

At the time of developing the module I was responsible for the coordination of both the theory and the fieldwork modules on a fourth-year level in the Social Work learning programme. In previous years the fieldwork and the theory were coordinated separately. However, in a curriculum review process this separation was identified as problematic in that there was not enough articulation between theoretical modules and fieldwork education and training. This led to a decision in that one person should be the coordinator of both theory and practice (fieldwork) on each year level. This decision was also consistent with outcomes-based education, where the separation of theory and practice is not advisable in terms of the

achievement of outcomes. The module Advanced Social Work Intervention was designed with the objective of improving articulation between fieldwork practice and theory. The module was developed because of feedback from practitioners in field placements and supervisors on a fourth-year level, who had identified a need to develop more strongly students' knowledge and ability to assess, intervene and evaluate on a fourth-year level. In keeping with the objective of optimum articulation between theory and fieldwork practice, this module was designed to feed directly into, and articulate with, what the students were required to do in their fieldwork placements. The major benefit of the module was envisaged to be the students' enhanced ability to apply what they learnt in this module to their practice in the field.

In my role as theoretical and fieldwork coordinator of the fourth year, I had discussed the exit-level outcomes previously with the students, when explaining how they were going to be assessed at the end of their fieldwork placement. This module emphasised certain of the exit-level outcomes which they were required to master on both a theoretical and a fieldwork practice level. In the module outline I included a section which provided an elaborate explanation of current educational policies. This was done so that they could contextualise and understand the role that the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) play in the education and training of Social Work students (Lombard, Grobbelaar & Pruis, 2003) for a detailed discussion on SAQA, the NQF and Social Work minimum standards).

I explained that understanding of the NQF and SAQA would be necessary since the education system in South Africa has changed. Universities have had to change their curricula from 2006, since the BSW at South African HEIs must now be benchmarked against minimum standards and exit-level outcomes in the field of Social Work and higher education. Specific Outcome 2 in the Unit Standard of planning and conducting an assessment required that a learner be given clear explanations of the NQF; hence I decided that it would be beneficial to include it in the module outline, so that all students would have the opportunity to learn about SAQA and the NQF, and how these bodies relate to the BSW qualification. In the module outline I also explained the BSW qualification and identified the exit-level outcomes which are relevant to this particular module. Those exit-level outcomes which are concerned with assessment, intervention and evaluation were included. Furthermore, techniques of consciousness-raising in relation to forms of exclusion and oppression and taking cognisance of positionality, i.e. where and how they were differentially situated in terms of the social markers of gender, race, generation, ability, etc., were also included as relevant.

In the module outline I referred students to a general theoretical orientation which informs the curriculum content – that of a critical, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive, strengths-based, user and social justice perspective. I alerted students to the congruence of this approach with the purpose of the BSW (SAQA BSW Qualification 2003),[2] the international definition of Social Work ratified in 2001,[3] and the Global Standards document ratified in 2004 (Global

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[2] The purpose of the professional four-year BSW qualification is stated as equipping learners with "skills to challenge the structural sources of poverty, inequality, oppression, discrimination and exclusion" (SAQA, 2003:1).

[3] The definition of social work, developed by the IASSW and the IFSW, was accepted internationally and reads as follows:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (Global Standards Document, 2004:2).

Qualifying Standards for Social Work Education and Training 2004).[4] The module was designed to assist students to critically engage with different paradigms when assessing, intervening and evaluating in social work, but it foregrounded the critical theoretical, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive approach which students would be required to understand, apply and later master in terms of their placements. They were reminded in the course outline that they would be given opportunities to demonstrate their competences against the associated assessment criteria in the exit-level outcomes when they engaged in fieldwork practice in the second semester of the year.

PREPARING SPECIFIC OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

In terms of the requirements for the planning and conducting an assessment of a learner, I had to develop specific outcomes and assessment criteria for these outcomes. I developed the following specific outcomes, which I explained to all students at the beginning of the course and which were spelt out in their course outline. It was specified in the assessment training workshop that specific outcomes and their associated assessment criteria must be carefully explained to students/learners prior to engaging with assessment tasks. The assessment criteria were drawn from the following exit-level outcomes as specified for the BSW (SAQA, 2003:3-4):

2. Assess client systems' social functioning (includes roles, needs, interactions, strengths, challenges and aspirations);

3. Plan and implement appropriate social work intervention strategies and techniques at micro, mezzo and macro levels;

6. Evaluate the outcomes of social work intervention strategies;

9. Demonstrate social work values while interacting with human diversity;

11. Identify, select and implement various techniques, methods and means of raising awareness, developing critical consciousness about the structural forces of oppression, exclusion and disempowerment, and use such awareness to engage people as change agents;

12. Analyse human behaviour with regard to the intersections of race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, differential abilities and sexual orientation.

I devised the following specific outcomes for the course, and made use of the above associated assessment criteria which are derived from those listed under the relevant the exit-level outcomes in the BSW qualification:

Specific outcome 1: An understanding of anti-discriminatory, critical theory, strengths-based and user perspectives in assessment, intervention and evaluation.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
1. *Analyses provide clear indications of how social differentiation and social stratification pave the way for prejudice, ethnocentrism and discrimination.*

Specific outcome 2: An understanding of the difference between the above perspectives and more conventional approaches to assessment, intervention and evaluation.

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[4] The Global Standards document (2004:6-7) also emphasises the need to address issues of exclusion, dispossession, vulnerability and social injustices as core purposes of social work.

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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

2.1   Analyses of client systems' needs and strengths reflect the application of appropriate theoretical frameworks.

2.2   Practice demonstrates awareness of different viewpoints and values, and the ability to appreciate these in relation to one's own views and values.

Specific outcome 3: An understanding of the similarities and differences in the approaches identified in 1.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

3.1   Analyses clearly elucidate how individual, family, group and community identities are formed in relation to socio-structural forces of oppression and/or exclusion.

Specific outcome 4: Application of the strengths-based and critical/autobiographical approach to assessment.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

4.1   Analyses of client systems' needs and strengths reflect the application of appropriate theoretical frameworks.

4.2   Assessments, intervention plans, strategies, techniques and outcomes analyses reflect sensitivity to diversity and the ability to work with diverse client system.

4.3   Assessments reflect the ability to undertake a comprehensive analysis of client systems' needs and strengths.

4.4   Assessments explicitly include analyses of possible elements of diversity that may impact on the professional relationship.

4.5   Analyses clearly elucidate how individual, family, group and community identities are formed in relation to socio-structural forces of oppression and/or exclusion.

4.6   Descriptions clearly elucidate the relationship between social differentiation and social stratification (in respect of factors such as race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, differential abilities and sexual orientation) and access to power, position, privilege, income, status and resources.

Specific outcome 5: Understanding of the techniques of critical theoretical, structural, political economic and anti-discriminatory approaches to intervention.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

5.1   Descriptions clearly elucidate the relationship between social differentiation and social stratification (in respect of factors such as race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, differential abilities and sexual orientation) and access to power, position, privilege, income, status and resources.

Specific outcome 6: Application of the techniques of the above approaches to intervention.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

6.1   Selected techniques, methods and means of awareness-raising are appropriate to the specific social issue, the social context and the level at which such awareness-raising needs to take place.

6.2   Intervention plans are based on assessment and the appropriate use of strategies and techniques to achieve identified goals.

6.3   *Assessments, intervention plans, strategies, techniques and outcomes analyses reflect sensitivity to diversity and the ability to work with diverse client systems.*

6.4   *Practice demonstrates the ability to engage individuals, families, groups and/or communities in critical and reflective discussion regarding the impact of oppressive forces in their lives.*

6.5   *Practice demonstrates awareness of different viewpoints and values, and the ability to appreciate these in relation to one's own views and values.*

6.6   *Resources that are identified and utilised are appropriate to client systems' needs, strengths and goals.*

6.7   *Intervention strategies, models and techniques are based on comprehensive assessment of client systems.*

6.8   *Intervention strategies and techniques are purposefully aimed at the achievement of identified goals.*

6.9   *Intervention strategies and techniques are appropriately implemented in accordance with corresponding theoretical assumptions.*

6.10   *The specific social issue (e.g. homosexuality, gender discrimination, HIV/AIDS, disability) that must be targeted as an area of intervention is clearly described.*

6.11   *Practice demonstrates the ability to assist individuals, families, groups and/or communities to explore alternative identities in order to enhance self-esteem.*

6.12   *Practice reflects efforts to engage people as change agents, advocates and/or lobbyists by building on their strengths and resources.*

6.13   *Analyses clearly elucidate how individual, family, group and community identities are formed in relation to socio-structural forces of oppression and/or exclusion.*

6.14   *Analyses provide clear indications of how social differentiation and social stratification pave the way for prejudice, ethnocentricism and discrimination.*

6.15   *Descriptions clearly elucidate the relationship between social differentiation and social stratification (in respect of factors such as race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, differential abilities and sexual orientation) and access to power, position, privilege, income, status and resources.*

Specific outcome 7: Understanding and application of the logical framework model.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

7.1   *Evaluations clearly describe the outcomes of the intervention strategies, techniques and processes utilised in relation to the stated goals and client systems' strengths and needs.*

ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Outcomes-based assessment requires that evidence is provided for the basis upon which judgements are made in relation to learners' competence against the criteria which are developed and that these are closely aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Driscoll & Wood, 2007). In the workshop on assessor training it was made clear that multiple forms of assessment should be used to determine the acquisition of capabilities and competencies. Firstly, the learners should be given a *diagnostic assessment* to determine their education and training needs in relation to the specific outcomes and their related assessment criteria. Secondly, there should be opportunities for *formative assessment*, where learners can get feedback about how they are

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doing in relation to the criteria or competency standards. This formative assessment is concurrent with the learning process and research has shown that timeous feedback is very important for satisfying learning needs (Butcher *et al*., 2006; Gibbs, 2006; Stevens & Levi, 2005). Thirdly, there should be opportunities for a *summative assessment*, when the learner is ready to be accredited – i.e. near the end of the course. This summative assessment should ideally take place when the learner and the assessor regard the learner to be ready to demonstrate that the learner has achieved the learning outcome, but in the case of a large number of learners in a course this process cannot be organised logistically in a learner-driven way.

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

In order to meet these criteria, in the first lecture I asked the learners to write and hand in their perceptions of the major concepts which were to be covered in this course, viz. assessment, intervention, evaluation, strengths-based, anti-discriminatory practice. This diagnostic assessment was conducted with the purpose of ascertaining the learners' assumptions and current or baseline knowledge levels of the major concepts dealt with in this module. I have always regarded it as necessary as a lecturer, to gain an understanding of students' prior learning experiences and what they have managed to internalise from this in order to teach in an effective manner (see Bozalek, 2004 for an example of this). Reading the learners' understandings of the basic concepts provided the scaffolding upon which to base teaching inputs to students and exercises for them to engage with in class time. Scaffolding is a Vygotskian (1962; 1978) notion of pedagogy, where the teacher provides a platform of support and plays a mediating role between the learners' prior learning and current thinking and their engagement with new knowledge. As the term suggests, the support which is offered to students is temporary and is removed once students have gained capacity in relation to the new knowledge (Brodie, Lelliot & Davis, 2002:99).

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

From the second lecture onwards and at the start of each lecture, learners were required to write a short piece responding to questions on the readings that they had to study before each lecture. They were also required to apply their knowledge to a particular scenario in order to ascertain whether they had been able to grasp what had been covered in class and whether they had the skills to apply it. It was envisaged that they would hand in these written pieces at each lecture, after they had been given a short amount of time to finalise the writing of them. However, they generally prepared them before class, as the readings and writing process was more time consuming than I had anticipated it to be. Also many students tended to struggle with academic literacy because of prior learning experiences and needed additional time to make sense of and assimilate texts. Students were informed that these writing exercises would function as part of the evidence of their ability to accomplish the specific outcomes. They were instructed to carefully consult the criteria which appeared under these specific outcomes so that they could be aware of the evidence required of them to be deemed competent in terms of these criteria. As in all higher education contexts, a mark of at least 50% is required to be considered competent. There were five written pieces of evidence which constituted their formative assessment**.** The written pieces counted for 50% of their marks – with each piece written (5 pieces) counting 10%. This constituted their continuous assessment mark. The following written exercises were required of students and the instructions for the exercises appeared in the following form in their module outline.

Questions to prepare for Session Two

Describe each difference between conventional and strengths-based/anti-oppressive approaches to assessment, as outlined by Graybeal (2001), by making reference to a case that you dealt with last year and showing how you assessed the client, which approach you used and what you would have assessed had you used the other approach.

NB. This writing exercise will give you the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of your competence in Specific Outcome No. 2.

Questions to prepare for Session Three

Examine the assessment sheet which has been provided to you, and using the Graybeal (2001) article, the chapter from Derek Clifford (1998) and your class notes, change the assessment instrument to incorporate the strengths-based, anti-discriminatory and critical/autobiographical (CA/B) approaches to assessment. Indicate on a separate sheet of paper your rationale for making these changes (i.e. the reasons why you have made them), referring to the relevant theory.

NB. This writing exercise will give you the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of your competence in Specific Outcome No. 4.

Questions to prepare for Session Four

After reading Young (1994), Coates (1992) and Carniol (1992), draw up a combined model which incorporates the techniques of Young's notion of empowerment, the techniques of the political economic and the structural approaches to social work.

NB. This writing exercise will give you the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of your competence in Specific Outcome No. 3.

Questions to prepare for Session Five

Using the case study given to you, explain how you would intervene using the

1. techniques of Coates (1992), Carniol (1992), Young (1994), Fook (1993) and
2. the principles of Thompson (1993);
3. identify the goals of your intervention;
4. identify the technique and principle you are using and why you are using it in that particular instance.

NB. This writing exercise will give you the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of your competence in Specific Outcome No. 5 and No. 6.

QUESTIONS TO PREPARE FOR SESSION SIX

Develop a logical framework model for the problem provided to you in the handout.

(Advanced Social Work Intervention Module Outline, 2003:12-15).

The learners in this module handed in one of these written pieces each week (there were 85 learners in total). A co-lecturer and I then divided the class in half and each responded to and gave elaborate feedback on each written piece. This was extremely time-consuming, but truly formative in that the students could utilise the feedback for understanding of the specific learning outcomes which pertained to the summative assessment. In a few instances students were given the opportunity of redrafting their written pieces, but this was not encouraged, because of the onerous workload which resulted from the feedback on a weekly basis to so many students. It was very useful to engage with the students' written pieces on a regular basis

in that teaching could be arranged in a responsive manner according to the students' needs and level of understanding of major concepts.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The summative assessment took the form of a take-home examination, which was available to learners at the start of the module, so that they had the opportunity, if they wished, to start working on it immediately. This take-home exam was the final part of the evidence that provided learners with the opportunity to demonstrate that they had satisfied the criteria of the specific outcomes. The format of a take-home examination was utilised as the summative assessment with the objective of allowing learners to spend as much time as they needed to think and write about the scenarios presented to them, and to make the assessment opportunity as transparent as possible, a requirement of outcomes-based learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). They were required to hand in this document only at the final session of the course. However, they had the option of handing in drafts of it before the due date and discussing the feedback or clarifying issues not understood for the duration of the course. The summative assessment involved the students viewing a dramatic enactment of a social worker intervening in a South African situation and writing their assessment of the situation and the theoretical approach underpinning it, critiquing the social worker's intervention, writing a dialogue on how they would intervene, and describing their goals and techniques of intervention with an explanation of why each technique had been utilised. This take-home examination gave students the final opportunity to demonstrate evidence of their competence against the associated assessment criteria in Specific Outcomes Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Although students were provided with this opportunity to write drafts of their take-home examination, not many of the 85 students took it up, which is a pity from their point of view, as they could have performed better had they received prior feedback.

CHOOSING THE CANDIDATE (LEARNER) AND PREPARING HIM/HER FOR ASSESSMENT

Although all 85 of the fourth-year Social Work students participated in the course, and I prepared them for the three forms of assessment, I had to select one member of the class as the person with whom I was to work intensively for the portfolio that I had to submit in order to become a registered assessor of Social Work students with SAQA. The decision of which learner from the class to select was based upon the advice of the facilitator in the assessment workshop I attended. She recommended that the workshop participants choose a learner who was not overly problematic and who would be able to demonstrate competencies with regard to specific outcomes being assessed. I decided then to choose one of the most competent and committed members of the class as my learner. Furthermore, the learner was a person who had started his degree in the early 1980s and had come back to university in twenty years later and so was a relatively mature student whom I thought could benefit from the assessment process. I initially approached the student to inquire whether he was interested in taking part in the assessment and allowed him a day to consider, after giving him details of what it would involve. He expressed an interest in participating and we set up a time and place for a pre-assessment interview. In the portfolio I described the following process in order to prepare this learner and all the others for assessment:

- Prepare the assessment environment so that it permits an accurate reflection of the learners competence.

The learners were to attend six lecture sessions of two hours each and read two or so articles or chapters every week in order to acquire competence in relation to the specific learning outcomes. Learning activities included power-point presentations, peer presentations in groups, and co-lecturing of the two lecturers on the topics which were covered in the course. They were also given notes in relation to the presentations on a weekly basis. The opportunities for assessment were presented in such a manner that "deep learning" (Biggs & Tang, 2007) was required and learners had to synthesise information, compare approaches, apply techniques and solve problems rather than regurgitate information or facts. The learners' competence was to be further assessed at the end of the second semester, when it would be established, through their fieldwork portfolio, whether they have been able to apply in their practice the approaches and techniques dealt with in this module.

- Explain the purpose of the assessment.

The purpose of the assessment was explained in the initial lecture period of the course with all of the learners as well as individually with the learner selected for this assessment. The purpose was explained as the opportunity for the learner to demonstrate evidence of competencies in relation to the specific learning outcomes, and for the learner to receive feedback on how he was faring in relation to these competencies and how this would assist in building the knowledge for the exit-level outcomes.

- Discuss the standards or criteria to be used.

The standards or criteria to be used were those of the BSW degree NQF level 7 and it was explained to the learners in class and individually that these are the criteria that every Social Work student in South Africa will be assessed against in order to be able to practice as a Social Worker. The criteria to be used were explicitly stated in the course outline and were covered in the module content.

- Ensure understanding of the specific outcomes and assessment criteria.

The understanding of the specific outcomes and assessment criteria used in the module was explained in lectures in the classroom situation to all learners and was covered in readings and course content. Learners were also given these outcomes for their fieldwork programme and attended a workshop on the necessity of drawing up a portfolio of evidence in relation to the criteria of the exit-level outcomes.

- Negotiate evidence required, and where or how this evidence may be gathered.

In the first session with the learners of this module, it was explained verbally and in written form on the module outline that evidence of a diagnostic assessment and formative and summative assessment tasks would be required of learners in order to assess their competence in relation to the specific learning outcomes and assessment criteria. In the individual session with the learner, I negotiated with the learner that he hand in a copy of his assessment tasks with my feedback on them, as well as an additional "clean" copy of his tasks with no comments on them, so that the co-lecturer could independently mark these assignments in order to judge the reliability of the assessment.

- Explain the methods of assessment that will be used during the compiling of the evidence and the summing up of the evidence.

The methods of assessment which were used in the forming and the summing up of evidence were discussed with all learners in the first session and on a weekly basis, so that they were clear about the tasks and how they were to be assessed.

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- Justify the use of the appropriate methods/tools based on strengths and weaknesses of the tools.

The strengths of the assessment tools were that they provided opportunities to assess knowledge, apply knowledge, and integrate theory and practice. The weakness of the tools is that they depend upon learner's writing and language skills, and that learners are unable to observe the real-life application of the techniques being taught – this was assessed at the end of the second semester of the particular year, when learners had completed their fieldwork placements.

- Negotiate date of formative and summative assessments, according to negotiated timeframes.

The date of formative and summative assessments was negotiated in the first lecture session and at times renegotiated as learners wished to have an extended time (by two days or so) to complete the required tasks.

- Discuss assessment roles and accountabilities.

I was responsible for reading the learner's tasks and providing written and verbal feedback to the learner in the form of comments and marks. The learner was responsible for writing and handing the tasks to me. The co-lecturer was responsible for reading, assigning marks and commenting on the learner's tasks independently for the purposes of comparison of assessments.

- Decide on assessment venues.

The assessment venues were the lecture hall and a smaller tutorial venue for individual sessions with the selected learner.

- Discuss resources required for the assessment, e.g. equipment and materials.

Module outlines, paper to print the tasks, a pen to make written comments and a venue to give feedback were the resources required for the assessment.

- Explain the procedure if learner is found to be Not Yet Competent (NYC).

If the learner was found to be NYC he would be able to appeal this decision, firstly, and if this failed, he would have the opportunity to re-evaluate and be reassessed. If this failed as well, he would have to repeat this course in the next year as part of the requirements for the Social Work curriculum.

- Explain the appeal or review procedure.

The learner could appeal to the Head of Department or the Dean to have his work assessed by another member of staff or an external examiner. If the work was judged as being competent, the moderator would discuss this with the assessor and a further decision would be made as to the competence of the learner in relation to the specific learning outcomes.

- Identify any potential learning barriers and negotiate strategies to overcome these.

The learner had been registered in the early 1980s and had come back to university as a mature student. He also held a position of responsibility in his community and with his family, as well as being the respected leader of a religious organisation, and so his work commitments were more extensive than those of other learners. For this reason, he was given additional time when he needed it to complete tasks.

- Complete and sign the assessment plan with the learner.

The assessment plan was completed and signed by the learner.

CONDUCTING THE ASSESSMENT AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO RELEVANT PARTIES

The assessment of the learner's competencies in relation to the specific outcomes was judged on the basis of the formative and summative assessment tasks which the student completed. I have already elaborated on the development of assessment tools in the form of written assignments. As part of the portfolio requirements, I had to specify the critical cross-field outcomes and the attributes for each specific outcome. I then marked and gave feedback to the learner on a written and verbal basis on each of the written assignments. As part of the portfolio of evidence I was required to elaborate upon how each piece of evidence satisfied the following criteria, which were referred to as VACCS (Validity, Authenticity, Currency, Consistency, Sufficiency) (regarded as necessary for good assessment practice) by the SAQA workshop coordinators:

- Validity – i.e. whether the evidence provided was aligned to the specific outcomes and assessment criteria. The evidence did match the standards, but only on a written basis. I said the following about validity: "The evidence showed that the learner could apply his knowledge, but his ability to perform in relation to the specific outcomes will only be measured in his behavioural performance during his fieldwork placement in the second semester. The evidence was in a format that enabled accurate judgement to be made about his level of competence. He was one of the 85 learners whose performance was measured".

- Consistency – that the evidence will be judged similarly regardless of who does the assessment. I said the following about the consistency: "The evidence was marked independently by two assessors who had very similar responses and findings". Both the assistant lecturer and I marked the student's evidence blindly (without knowledge of how the other had assessed the pieces of evidence), and came to similar conclusions.

- Currency – that the evidence reflects skills that are still current. I said about the learner: "The evidence is current and as the module was completed in the last two weeks. The evidence relates to the exit-level outcomes of the BSW degree (2003) which are current".

- Authenticity – that the evidence provided was actually created by that person. I said: "To the best of my knowledge, the learner did really produce the evidence that was submitted. There were 6 different written assignments which were of a consistent standard. Furthermore, the learner's verbal contribution in class verified that his knowledge of the specific outcomes was excellent – this served as corroborating evidence for his written assignments. In the feedback sessions on an individual basis the learner was also able to demonstrate his grasp and application of the knowledge. His work was produced alone. The work was also signed by the learners as being their own".

- Sufficiency – that enough evidence of an acceptable level or quality is presented. I said: "The evidence covers all the selected specific outcomes and assessment criteria and thus gives a comprehensive view of the learner's competence in this area".

The more direct the evidence, the better it is regarded (Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Stevens & Levi, 2005). Therefore the best form of evidence is actually witnessing whether somebody can do something or not; this would satisfy the above criteria more than indirect forms of assessment. In this case students were required to apply their knowledge to various practical situations, but it was all assessed in terms of writing. It would have been preferable to be able to assess whether students were actually able to do what was required of them practically, but this could not be judged at that point.

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The feedback was discussed thoroughly with the learner, making it a very democratic process. The learner did not agree with all the feedback given and was provided with an opportunity to contest the assessor's views of his competence. If there had been major contestation about his competence, he would have had the opportunity to appeal.

REVIEW OF ASSESSMENT

The review makes the process dialogical in that one has the opportunity to reflect on how appropriate and fair the process was and also to hear from the learner what his views on the process were. The learner expressed in the portfolio that he felt that I had taken his special needs into account as a married mature student, who had major community duties such as being an imam. He was satisfied that the assessment procedures were discussed with him and agreed upon. He found the feedback relevant to his needs in that it was always encouraging and served to clarify where improvement was needed. Outcomes, according to him, were always related to objectives. He was of the opinion that, when he sought clarity, the assessor responded positively. With regard to the assessment decisions, the learner did not always agree with me and actually submitted written contestations in relation to my written feedback. The following is an example of the learner's response to feedback from the lecturer:

Professor Bozalek, I hereby wish to respond to your comments in paragraphs 7 and 8.

In Paragraph 7 I wrote:

Sophie was neglected, emotionally abused, isolated, confused, which in conventional terms would be taken to be psychologically battered and needing clinical/psychological intervention. As an intervention technique, from a <u>strengths-based perspective</u>, if necessary, I will refer Sophie to appropriate statutory structures or therapists so that all these needs can be addressed and constructively worked through.

Your comment to this was: *"Why would you not deal with it yourself?"*

I further stated:

This approach will also ensure that her problems are not 'psychologised'. She will then be able to receive additional social support and multi-disciplinary therapy as required in overcoming the psychological problems that she is experiencing. (<u>Maximise communal supports to meet the needs of the client</u>).

Your comment was: *"How can you be sure what approach these people would use in dealing with her?"*

My response to your comments on this paragraph is as follows:

In paragraph 2 I stated that I will have a few interview sessions with Sophie "***whereby we will discuss all the issues (issue per issue in different sessions) that are affecting her"***. I have therefore dealt with all of Sophie's psychological problems, as well as other aspects. What I intended to do in paragraph 7 is ***"<u>If necessary, I will refer Sophie</u>"*** to other treatment centres, ensuring ***"that her problems are not psychologised".***

Maybe I should have spelt it out clearer, that my adopted action in par. 7 – I believe – is also an <u>empowerment process</u> for Sophie, on the basis of No. 9 of Neil Thompson's (1993) Principles for Anti-Discriminatory Practice (maximising the power of clients and giving them as much control as possible over their circumstances).

Professor Bozalek, the <u>empowerment process</u> also addresses the concern you expressed that "therapists operating from a deficit paradigm" might influence Sophie negatively. Remember I oriented Sophie in paragraph 2 by addressing her problems on the basis of

strictly adhering to the Strengths-Based Approach. The referral *"If necessary, I will refer Sophie…"* would be a <u>*selective referral.*</u> Hence, I would not have a problem if Sophie, at this stage, was exposed to therapeutic sessions with a therapist from a conventional perspective.

The essence is that Sophie will then be able to distinguish between the two approaches, be able to choose and select the positive aspects of both approaches that are good and beneficial to herself. Thus, she takes charge of her situation, decides on matters and is in full control of what she wants and where she wants to go. The point is I do not control her and I do not prescribe or impose my views on her. <u>*To me, this is empowerment and the maximizing of support for opportunities and options for her to meet her needs.*</u> (All emphases in the original).

The above passage is one example of the learner's contestations. Although I did not necessarily agree with his justifications and explanations for his intervention, I was delighted that he was able to challenge my comments. His ability to contest signified that he was really engaged with the process and that our relationship was such that he had the confidence to put his own position forward. Since we had face-to-face sessions in relation to the feedback, we were able to engage with the comments at a deeper level and in that way interact in a dialogical and non-defensive manner. I see this as a major strength of the outcomes-based approach to assessment.

The learner had to sign every single document as proof that it was his own work and that he had seen and agreed with the assessor's comments and marks. He perceived the whole process to be comprehensive and transparent, which could also be seen as another substantial advantage of this process of assessment.

The following is an example of a Table from my portfolio of evidence of information that I had to provide about the assessment review process.

ASSESSMENT REPORT, REVIEW AND IMPROVEMENT DOCUMENT

<div align="center">

FIGURE 1
AN EXAMPLE OF TABULATED INFORMATION ABOUT ASSESSMENT REVIEW PROCESS IN PORTFOLIO OF EVIDENCE

</div>

ISSUES	COMMENTS
Did the assessment go according to plan?	Yes, it all went to plan.
Did anything unexpected happen?	No, except that once or twice the learner asked for additional time to hand in the assignments, which was granted due to the circumstances under which he is currently operating.
Were you pleased with the assessment decision, i.e. was it what you expected?	Yes – it actually surpassed expectations as the learner was able to demonstrate consistently and in an outstanding manner evidence of his grasp and application of the specific learning outcomes.
How could the process have been carried out more efficiently?	The process could have been carried out more efficiently if the class of learners was not so large and the assessor was not responsible for assessing such large numbers.
How could the process of assessing the knowledge be improved?	It could be improved through direct observation of learner's behaviour, e.g. through role plays or in the second term tape recordings of interviews with clients and the learner's analysis of this interview in terms of the learning outcomes.
How could the Performance Observation checklist be improved?	N/A

ISSUES	COMMENTS
Was the evidence you gathered sufficient to make a judgment of competence?	Yes – there were a number of written assignments which required sophisticated application of knowledge and deep learning rather than surface regurgitation of knowledge.
Was the way you obtained feedback from the worker effective?	Yes, the learner was able to demonstrate that he understood the instructions and the feedback given to him.
Were you pleased with the way you communicated your decision to the learner? If not, how could this have been improved?	Yes, I wrote comments, gave model answers and discussed my comments with the learner.
How did you handle the learner's 　　Aggression or emotion 　　Need to appeal your decision 　　Nervous behaviour 　　Language difficulties?	The learner was a mature student who required very little prompting. He was very cooperative and enthusiastic about the course and about the feedback he received.
How would you improve the assessment process?	By observing the performance in relation to a practical situation.

THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ENGAGING IN THIS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

I was able to identify a number of advantages for my own teaching practice from engaging in this process of becoming a registered assessor for SAQA.

The major advantages are delineated as follows:

- The outcomes-based approach to assessment encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning process. The lecturer/assessor is regarded as a resource to be consulted in the process of acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes required for the exit-level outcomes. The co-lecturer and I repeatedly referred to ourselves as resources that students could approach and use in which ever way would benefit them to demonstrate their competencies in the specific outcomes set out in the course outline. Learners had to take responsibility for their own learning through preparing for class by reading and writing their assignments and applying their knowledge and skills for formative assessment.

- OBE assessment is respectful to learners and encourages rather than discourages the learning process. It is similar to the strengths-based approach in social work, which emphasises capacities, capabilities, strengths and competencies rather than focusing on deficits. If learners are found to be Not Yet Competent (NYC) (which means that they have not acquired the necessary knowledge, skills or attitudes), this is not regarded as a deficit within themselves or that they are somehow lacking in what is required. It is rather constructed as the learner not having been able to produce sufficient evidence of their competences. I found it much easier to communicate to learners that they had not yet been able to produce sufficient evidence than to call them incompetent, or to tell them that they had failed, and this had the effect of making learners less defensive about their learning gaps.

- OBE encourages attentiveness to where students' learning needs are by providing opportunities for baseline or diagnostic assessment. Lecturers often find themselves in the position of assuming particular knowledge on the part of learners. This approach prevents

these assumptions by requiring lecturers to establish the levels of knowledge before formative assessment takes place.

- OBE-aligned assessment encourages communication and feedback between lecturers and students. Formative assessment requires adequate feedback so that competences can be demonstrated in the summative assessment. Often lecturers do not provide feedback which is timeous for the learning process, which research (Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Stevens & Levi, 2005) has shown is essential for student learning, and this forces them to do so.

- OBE assessment lends itself to assessing students or learners in real-life situations. This is beneficial to UWC students, who often do not do adequate justice to their abilities as a result of poor writing skills. If students' abilities to assess and intervene with clients were assessed through participant observation or by interviewing clients about the students' skills, they may be assessed in a more direct and fairer manner.

- OBE assessment is conducive to democratic forms of assessment and encourages practices of accountability on the part of the assessor/lecturer for the decisions made in relation to competencies. Because the learner is assured that he/she has access to appeal against the decision that the assessor makes, the assessor would have to be in a position to justify why he/she had made decisions about the evidence of competence. This makes the process of assessment far more transparent than has normally been the case at university level. Lecturers are often defensive when asked on what basis they have made judgements about student assessment. This also means that criteria have to be specified and fleshed out with regard to the exit-level outcomes. Also learners are given the opportunity of knowing exactly how they are going to be assessed, and in signing the agreement on the assessment plan, both lecturers and learners are made responsible and accountable for the assessment process, which has to be made transparent.

- The VACCS (validity, authenticity, consistency, currency and sufficiency) criteria in the SAQA assessment provide for a rigorous evaluation of evidence against specific criteria, and would obviate more generalised evaluations with regard to whether or not learners have acquired the requisite knowledge, skills and values. Furthermore, criterion-referenced assessment does not encourage learners to compete against each other in the way that norm-referenced assessment does, but focuses on the learner improving him- or herself in relation to the specific criteria which are provided upfront for the learners to understand and engage with from the outset.

- OBE assessment requires reflection on appropriateness and suitability of assessment methods in that a major emphasis is put on the alignment of the learning activities, assessment and outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

- The approach which is part of the SAQA unit assessment unit standard also looks at equity issues in relation to overcoming potential learning barriers to assessment with regard to language, literacy and numeracy problems, physical disadvantages, nervousness and anxiety, etc., but does not elaborate on how these can be accommodated or overcome.

- The methods of assessment assist in the learning process as they become an integral part of learning – it becomes assessment for learning rather than assessment for making judgements (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Bryan & Clegg, 2006; Butcher *et al.*, 2006; Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Stevens & Levi, 2005).

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- The assessment is a dialogical process where the lecturer does not have unchallengeable authority or claims to certainty; there is much more of a sense of accessibility on the lecturer's part, which is important for learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

Outcomes-based assessment techniques are, however, limited in certain respects. The following are some of the identified limitations:

- Since learning outcomes are predetermined and standardised, learner-driven knowledge and significant input into curriculum development by learners is not really possible. Learners have to adhere to the delineated outcomes. By applying minimum standards in the form of exit-level outcomes, one could be missing possibilities for learning from students in social work. Learners from differing gender, class and ethnicity backgrounds could contribute significantly to appropriate South African social work knowledge education (see Bozalek, 2004 for elaboration on how student knowledges can be used to inform the social work curriculum). Supervisors, educators and practitioners in many instances occupy privileged class and sometimes ethnic positions. They could gainfully learn from students' knowledge of the communities from which they come and from students' own experiences. Having a universalised set of exit-level outcomes precludes such opportunities, as not much time is left to pursue issues outside of the exit-level outcomes and their associated assessment criteria.

- One could question whether SAQAfying the curriculum gives adequate consideration to the inequalities of previous opportunities and life experiences. To what extent is a middle-class learner who can conform to traditional middle-class expectations anticipated in the assessment of learners? There is certainly the assumption with the minimum standards that learners approach the curriculum from a position of sameness or equality, which is definitely not the case for UWC students, who are now drawn mainly from the Eastern and Western Cape and have a background of coming from historically disadvantaged educational systems. That is, they are academically under-prepared and not familiar with academic discourse. The economist Amartya Sen (1995) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1995), amongst others, have drawn attention to the idea that access to goods such as education in itself is not enough to judge whether a society is providing opportunities for living an adequate human life. It is people's position in relation to these goods which has to be taken into account in order to make decisions about what is needed.

- Outcomes-based education does not really address power relations or how lecturers and learners may be differentially situated in terms of power differentials such as race, class, gender, generation, status, etc.

- OBE does not acknowledge the political nature of assessment and assumes that a position of value neutrality is possible, rather than viewing knowledge as situated. One's positionality may be influential in terms of how one assesses, what one's paradigm is, etc. Fortunately the exit-level outcomes are progressive, but the situation could have looked very different, if they had been constructed by conservative academics or practitioners.

- The universalisation of exit-level outcomes assumes that these are appropriate for any context. Perhaps the important issue is *who* is drawing up these standards for the profession and *how* this is being done. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999:5) refer to the importance of the process of defining quality. Wide stakeholder consultation and input into the process of establishing minimum standards is an important process, as was the case with the Bachelor of Social Work minimum standards.

- The outcomes-based framework has the potential to be used in a mechanistic and postitivist manner, although this need not necessarily be the case.

- It is important to capture that which is dynamic and unpredictable in the exit-level outcomes by focusing both on intended and unintended outcomes, in order to maintain creativity in teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have described the journey that I undertook in preparing to become an accredited assessor for SAQA and my attempt at integrating the BWS exit-level outcomes into the Social Work curriculum. I have elaborated on the Specific Outcomes in which one needs to demonstrate competence by developing and presenting a portfolio of evidence on a particular learner. I described how I SAQAfied a particular Social Work course at a fourth-year level entitled Advanced Intervention in order to meet the criteria for the accreditation to become an assessor and in order to incorporate the new exit-level outcomes. I considered the pros and cons of SAQAfying the curriculum and conclude that, although there are problems with outcomes-based assessment, it does allow for a rigorous approach to assessment and has the potential of democratising teaching and learning.

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Prof Vivienne Bozalek, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa.