

A Web Application for Aiding Tutors to Develop Course Outlines

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Abstract: In 2011, the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency prepared and distributed a course outline template, in paper format, to be filled in by the university tutors. This template contains details about learning outcomes, generic skills, teaching and assessment procedures for each course. The teaching staff, having little knowledge on the aforementioned topics, faced serious difficulties in filling it in. Thus, we developed a web-based information system for outlining courses in our institution. It guides the user (tutor) step-by-step to properly record, document and store every detail of a course, and export it to a pdf file. Additionally, by recording the information in a database, it allows any kind of queries, thus it offers various statistics in university/school/departmental level on the usage of verbs of the Bloom's taxonomy, about the nurtured generic skills, about the students' workload per course, etc. The system is user-friendly, according to the results of a short survey, and it is fully expandable. This paper focuses on the presentation of the web-based system application along with the benefits it introduces firstly for the tutors and secondly for the quality assurance team of the university.

1 INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in the Greek higher education was specified by virtue of Law 3374/2005, whereby a single, nationwide ongoing evaluation process was established, aimed at recording, analysing and systematically assessing teaching and research work, study programmes and other services of higher education institutes (Eurydice network, <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice>).

The same Law established the *Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency in Higher Education* (HQA or ADIP in Greek), which is the competent body for implementing quality assurance in higher education. HQA's mission is to periodically certify the quality of higher education institutions, of both the internal system of quality assurance developed in higher education institutes, and, the study programmes of all three cycles of higher education, which are offered by academic units. Recently, Law 4009/2011 established a nationwide accreditation system, which follows internationally acceptable qualitative and quantitative criteria along with the guidelines and indicators specified by the European Area of Higher Education.

Within the frame of the last Law, the HQA prepared a course outline template. This template, in paper format, along with few guidelines and some examples were distributed to every quality assurance unit at university level. The local units, in their turn, distributed the material to every teaching member of the academic community.

However, what was missing was an awareness of the professors and tutors towards these *new* quality assurance issues like, using Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives in cognitive domain to express learning outcomes, introducing generic skills and demonstrating their enhancement via teaching and assessment methods, techniques and practices applied etc. In other words, this initiative introduced a new challenge to Greek Universities, a competency-based reformation of curricula, as the current international trend is. In fact, the endeavour to enhance employability skills through higher education studies is not unique in Greece.

Similar efforts are also outlined in reports from other countries, including the Spellings Commission's report in the United States (Spellings, 2006), the Dearing report in the United Kingdom (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997), and the Bradley review in Australia (Bradley et al., 2008).

This obvious difficulty of the academic staff drove us to develop a web-based application for tutors, who would like to fill-in their courses' outline in a *safer* environment instead of the paper format, where faults and misunderstandings could occur. Moreover, our system allows extracting information in university/school/departmental level on all the documented elements, such as the usage of verbs of the Bloom's taxonomy, the enhancement of generic skills, the students' workload per course, etc.

To assess the user-friendliness and acceptance of the system we were aided by volunteers, tutors in our university, who used the system and responded to a short survey.

In this context, this paper is organised as follows: the second section briefly presents the background on the quality assurance process application in Greece that motivated this work. Section three presents the system architecture and then, in section four, the evaluation and application first results are discussed. Finally, some concluding remarks are given in the last section.

2 BACKGROUND

The HQA, as an independent authority, supervises and supports the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to implement processes for the assurance and continuous improvement of quality. According to Law 4009/2011, which introduces the main principles of accreditation, the HQA among others, prepared a template for courses outline.

The course outline template is divided into five (5) sections (<https://www.adip.gr/en/accreditation-docs.php>). The first one contains some general information about a specific course, which can easily be completed by academics.

The second section of the template is devoted to the learning outcomes and generic skills that a specific course offers. The completion of this section of the template requires deep knowledge and expertise. The third section is devoted to the syllabus of a specific course.

The fourth section of the template examines the teaching and learning methods as well as the assessment procedures that tutors apply for the evaluation of the students' performance. Thus, the following information is requested: (a) the type of a course's delivery, as a face-to-face or a distance learning, etc. (b) the ICT usage in teaching/learning process, and (c) the teaching methods applied, like lectures, seminars, etc. For this last component (c) tutors have to declare the activities of students and

the total work-load in hours during the semester. The students' study hours for each learning activity have to be given as well as the hours of non-directed study, according to the principles of the ECTS. This means that a tutor who is teaching a course of 5 ECTS has to declare 125 hours per semester divided in specific activities for students, e.g. *lectures: 26 hours, laboratories: 26 hours, group project: 23 hours and self study (study at home): 50 hours*. Moreover, in the same (fourth) section the tutors have to clarify the methods of evaluation for the summative procedures.

Lastly, in the fifth section of the template, the suggested bibliography, books and journals, are required to be filled-in.

However, according to the HQA's Annual Report of 2015, where 28 thousands of courses outlines at 36 HEIs across the country were taken into account, the documentation is totally incomplete (HQA, Annual Report 2015). The shortcomings are mainly focused on the second section of the template, which refers to the Learning Outcomes & generic skills and at the fourth section, which concerns the teaching and assessment methods applied. Indicatively, at 24 HEIs out of 36, the courses' outlines have been completed, with various completion percentages, varying, e.g. in two Institutions, from 72.8% to 1.2%, respectively. Finally, in 10 Institutions no course outlines were completed.

The findings of the Report for the crucial fields of learning outcomes saw a very high deviation from the goal of completely documenting all the undergraduate programmes. The rate of completion in the majority of under-graduate programmes is less than 40%, while in a significant number of Institutions it is less than 5%. Similarly, in the teaching and assessment section, most courses outlines are far beyond the initial goal of full completion, the highest rate of completed outlines is around 55% (in management schools).

Pioneers in the whole effort among the Greek HEIs are the technological and management schools, while engineering schools are still far from reaching this goal.

In this frame, in 2017 the local quality assurance team of the Technical University of Crete distributed the course outline template aiming to provide this information to HQA. The above difficulties, as set out in the Annual Report of the HQA (2015), also manifested during the form completion (in paper format) process. Our feeling is that the completion of the form was treated as an extra bureaucratic work, given the low degree of ownership of the concepts of quality in tertiary education.

Bee Bee Sng (2008) came to the same conclusions in the case of Singapore HEIs reformation, where there was an inadequate preparation of teaching staff to adapt to rapid educational changes. Educational changes affect academics in more than one ways, the reader is referred indicatively to Fullan (1991), Ford et al. (1996).

In order to address the shortages of teachers' knowledge and experience, as well as the limited time they have for any work beyond research and teaching, the authors, based on their research interests (Krassadaki and Matsatsinis, 2012; 2017; Krassadaki, et al., 2017; Krassadaki et al., 2014, Spanoudakis et al., 2017) and previous experience, designed and implemented a web-based application.

Our main goals are (a) to help tutors in the syntax of the learning outcomes by adopting the simpler format of using one verb of the Bloom's taxonomy per sentence, according to the literature, (b) to develop a database of verbs based on the Bloom's taxonomy, (c) to develop a database of various generic skills, (d) to create some controls i.e. comparison of the ECTS per course with the workload of students, comparison of the learning activities with declared generic skills, etc, so that the information given is validated and ready to be examined by the quality assurance team.

3 THE WEB APPLICATION

The system was developed using state-of-the-art technologies for web applications. The model-view-controller (MVC) software architecture (Leff and Rayfield, 2001) was employed, as it offers the possibility to reuse objects and is easily extensible. We used the PHP programming language with Javascript, combined with SQL statements for querying and updating the database.

3.1 System Architecture

The system Architecture is presented in Figure 1 and shows that a user can access the system with an internet browser application. The system executes on a web server and also employs an SQL database. To deploy our system we used the XAMPP platform (www.apachefriends.org), a free distribution, which employs the Apache web server and the MySQL database. All used components are open source, thus they adhere to all modern standards and are safe for their use.

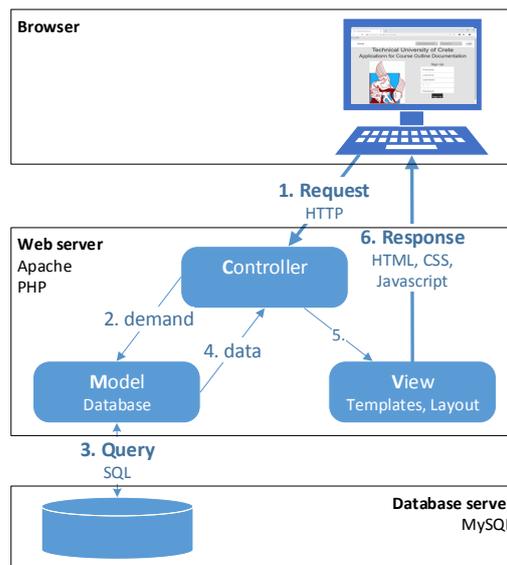


Figure 1: MVC model and System Architecture.

The most important aspect of our system architecture is the relational database specification that gives it some important properties and that allows to extract information about the course learning outcomes.

3.2 Data Management

The database schema is provided in the form of an Entity-Relationship (ER) Model (Bagui and Earp, 2004; Chen, 1976) in Figure 2 the major entities are:

- *courses*, whose major attributes are their name and key. There are other attributes and relationships that are hidden in the diagram as they would clutter it and are not related to the main points of this paper, however, for completeness we name a few such as the tutor, teaching hours, department of school, pre- or post-graduate course type, teaching hours and credits, etc,
- *activities*, whose name indicates their type, such as participating to lectures, undertaking projects, following laboratory classes, seminars, studying, etc,
- *skills*, whose name indicates a generic skill (Bennett et al., 2000). We will use *generic skills* to refer to skills and competencies that are beyond disciplinary knowledge and which can be applied broadly across different contexts, like decision-making, teamwork, production of new research ideas, project design and management, respect for diversity

and multiculturalism, respect for the natural environment, demonstrating social, professional and ethical responsibility, exercise of criticism and self-criticism, written communication, oral communication, leadership, initiative, time management, problem solving, etc. Other terms, such as *transferable skills*, *employability skills*, *general competences* and *key competencies*, have also been used in the literature to refer to the same concept.

- *assessment categories*, such as projects, written examinations, laboratory reports, etc. Some of them have:
 - *sub-categories*, for example a written examination can have multiple choice questions, or problem solving questions, while a team project may have an oral examination, or a public presentation.
- *verbs*, whose names are verbs that have been classified according to the Bloom's taxonomy of learning (Bloom, 1956). Classification attempts have produced various lists at international level, the list of the Teaching and Educational Development Institute of the University of Queensland (1996) has been used herein, and,
- *levels*, that refer to Bloom's different levels of learning for *knowledge* (level 1), *comprehension* (level 2), *application* (level 3), *analysis* (level 4), *synthesis* (level 5), and, *evaluation* (level 6) (Bloom, 1956).

Relationships connect the entities and only in the case of a *course has verbs* relationship (bottom-left of Figure 2) do we use an attribute, one, though, that is important, the sentence created using the connected verb.

An important aspect of the database architecture is the relationships shown on the top of Figure 2, i.e. the *activities* nurture *skills* and the *categories* validate *skills*. When tutors add generic skills to their courses, e.g. *team working*, then they are prompted to add activities that nurture them, e.g. *team project*, and assessment methods for validating the skill, e.g. *team project assessment* with *oral presentation*.

3.3 Graphical User Interface

The Graphical User Interface (GUI) was developed in such a way that it can be multi-lingual. The current implementation supports the Greek and English languages.

The GUI of the application first shows a login screen. The user enters username and password and then is shown a monitor. If the user's role is that of the administrator he has an extended list of possible tasks. Most important are the tasks for inserting new courses, for matching a course with a professor, for inserting new verbs or generic skills. If the user's role is that of a tutor then the user can examine his/her courses and select one for editing its outline template using a web form.

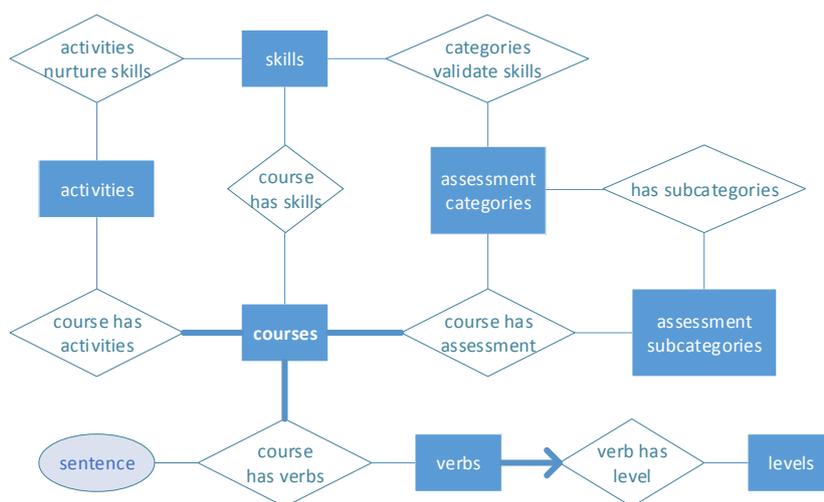


Figure 2: The ER Diagram. Rectangles represent *Entity* sets, diamonds represent *Relationship* sets and ovals represent *Attributes* of entities or relationships. Trivial attributes such as entity names and keys are hidden. Bold connectors indicate that at least one instance of a relationship exists, while if there is an arrow it means that exactly one instance of the relationship exists for that entity. For example a course has one or more verbs, while a verb has exactly one level.

(2) LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning Outcomes
 The learning outcomes of the course describe the specific knowledge, skills and competences of an appropriate level that students will acquire after successfully completing the course.
 Refer to Appendix A.

- Description of the Level of Learning Outcomes for each course of study in line with the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework
- Descriptive Indicators of Levels 6, 7 & 8 of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and Annex B
- Learning Outcomes Writing Guide

After completing this course the student will be able to:

↑ ↓ Define (Knowledge) ▼	a new product using modern ICT
↑ ↓ Describe (Comprehension) ▼	Information/Communication Technologies (RFID, QR codes, NFC) relevant to
↑ ↓ Use (Application) ▼	XML, JSON file types, SQL for querying a relational database
↑ ↓ Analyse (Analysis) ▼	BPMN models
↑ ↓ Design(Synthesise) (Synthesis) ▼	business process models according to the BPMN international standard
↑ ↓ Propose (Synthesis) ▼	a network architecture and firewall rules

Figure 3: The learning outcomes editor of the second section of the course outline form. The user can select the verb on the left and then complete the sentence on the right. The user can see the verb's level in the Bloom taxonomy in parenthesis. Finally, the user can click on the left side (where the two arrows are shown) and drag and drop the outcome before or after another. In the figure the user has used this feature to sort the outcomes based on the verb's level in the Bloom taxonomy.

Generic Skills
 Considering the general competencies that the graduate must have acquired (as listed in the Diploma Supplement and below), which one(s) the course enhances?

<input type="checkbox"/> Research, analysis and synthesis of data and information, using the necessary technologies
<input type="checkbox"/> Adapting to new situations
<input type="checkbox"/> Decision-making
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Autonomous work
<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork

Figure 4: Documenting generic skills in the second section of the course outline form (the figure shows part of the form).

We will focus on the second and fourth parts of the form, as these were identified earlier in sub-section 2.2 as the most difficult parts of the course outline template for the tutors.

Figure 3 shows the first part of the second section of the course outline form that is about entering learning outcomes. Note that the user does not write verbs, he/she selects them from a drop down menu. Thus, only qualified verbs can be used for forming sentences. The text of the sentence is the one recorded at the sentence attribute of the course has verbs relationship at the bottom of Figure 2.

If a user indicates the need of a new verb, then it can be inserted to the database by the administrator using a specific form. That form also allows the verb to be inserted in one or both of the supported languages (English and Greek).

Note that we have introduced a feature that allows the user to drag and drop a learning outcome before or after another. This was inserted due the the HQA requirement that only the six more important ones should be considered for the HQA template. Using our system, the user can write as many outcomes as he/she wishes and at the end of the process give priority to the most important ones.

Figure 4 shows a part of the list of generic skills among which the tutor can select those that best apply for the documented course.

Figure 5 introduces the fourth section of the course outline form. At the start of the section the user selects the lecture method (face to face or distance learning), documents the use of ICT technologies for teaching and, most importantly, outlines the educational activities and the student workload related to each one of them. The application aids the user by automatically summing up the workload and also indicating the needed workload per unit of credit (ECTS). In this section the tutor can also add more details in a free text box (not shown in the figure).

Almost at the end of his/her work, the user selects the method of assessment of the student's performance in the course. A relevant part of the form is shown in Figure 6. The basic information about all assessment methods is there, however, the tutor can add more information in free text below (not shown in the figure). The percentage of each summative assessment method is added up to 100%. If this is not the case a specific message informs the tutor.

(4) TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS - EVALUATION		
LECTURE METHOD	Face to Face	
USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES <small>ICT in Teaching, in Laboratory Education, in Communication with Students</small>	In Teaching	Support learning with E-Class.
TEACHING ORGANIZATION <small>Describe in detail the way and methods of education. Lectures, Seminars, Laboratory Exercise, Field Exercise, Study & Analysis of Bibliography, Tutorial, Practice (Placement), Clinical Exercise, Artistic Lab, Interactive Teaching, Educational Visits, Project Work, etc.</small> <small>The student's study hours for each learning activity and the hours of non-guided study according to the ECTS principles are mentioned.</small>	Educational Activity	Workload of Semester (13 weeks * hours per week)
	Lectures	18
	Laboratories	0
	Tutorials	0
	Laboratories/Tutorials	0
	Team Project	
	Individual Project	40
	Laboratory Exercises	
	Field Work	
	Educational Visit	
	Research/ Study	
	Self Studies	17
	Seminars	
	Literature Review	
	Internship	
	Artistic Laboratory	
Interactive Teaching		
Artistic Creation		
Total Course (25 hours of workload per unit of credit)	75	

Figure 5: The lecture method, use of information technologies and teaching organization/evaluation sub-sections of the fourth section of the course outline form. The *self study* term shown in the form refers to the hours that the student will spend to study at home.

Assessment Language: English		
Written Final Examination	30	Summative
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Multiple Choice Questions / Matching	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Comparative evaluation of theoretical issues	
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Short answer questions	
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Problem solving questions	
Team Project	()%	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Public Presentation	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Oral Exam	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Project Score	
Individual Project	70	Summative
	<input type="checkbox"/> Public Presentation	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Oral Exam	
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project Score	

Figure 6: The Students assessment sub-section of the fourth section of the course outline form (the figure shows part of the form).

The system guides the user by providing him with available options in all the important fields of the form. Numeric options, such as activity workload, and student evaluation, are automatically calculated for the assistance of the user and for time efficiency.

Additionally, when filling in the form, window notifications are displayed to avoid errors. Finally, the instructor can export the data into a pdf file. Note that the tutor doesn't have to complete everything in one session, whenever he/she wants to switch context he can *save* his/her work and continue at another time.

4 EVALUATION AND RESULTS

To evaluate our system we found volunteers among the tutors of our university (from Lecturers to Professors). 16 tutors completed the forms for 21 courses. Then they answered a short questionnaire to help us in assessing their experience and the performance of our system.

We had two types of answer, one denoting agreement and another denoting satisfaction with a range from 1 to 5 (1: strongly disagree/fully dissatisfied, 5: strongly agree/extremely satisfied).

When questioning whether the system worked properly and without failures, half of respondents (50%) replied "Agree", 35.7% answered "Strongly agree" and 14.3% remained neutral.

In a subsequent question, most of them were quite satisfied with the list of verbs given for the recording of the learning outcomes, as the answers prevailed to "Very Satisfied" and "Extremely Satisfied", with rates of 64.3% and 35.7% respectively.

Then, as far as the question about the list of generic skills is concerned, the majority, 64.3%, said it was "Extremely Satisfied", a smaller percentage of 21.4% believed it was "Very Satisfied" and the remaining 14.3% remained neutral.

The system automatically calculates the semester workload based on individual activities durations, and 64.3% of the tutors stated that this feature helped them "Very much", 21.4% believe that this calculation helped them and 14.3% were indifferent.

In the question of the adequacy of the options for student assessment, the largest percentage of 57.1% replied that they were "Very Satisfied", while 35.7% were "Extremely Satisfied". 7.1% were neutral.

The 64.3% of tutors found it "Very easy" to become familiar with the system, 28.6% found it "Quite" easy and 7.1% had a little more difficulty.

Overall, the 71.4% of the tutors who participated were "Very Satisfied" with the use of the system and 28.6% claimed they were "Extremely Satisfied".

From the analysis conducted in the database of our web application, the following observations were drawn. The most popular verbs that were chosen to record the learning outcomes of the courses are presented in the Table 1. Each course outline allows the user to select each verb once.

It is also interesting to focus on the Bloom's taxonomy level of the verbs employed by our 16 users. Looking at Figure 7 the reader can note that as the levels rise more verbs are used.

Table 2 presents, in descending order, the choices from the Generic Skills that the users (tutors) claimed to be acquired by the students after the completion of their courses. "Autonomous work" has been chosen in 85.7% of the courses and "Problem Solving" in 76.2% of the courses. The "Decision-making" skill is also used frequently, in more than 50% of the courses.

It is also notable that most of the tutors disregarded the first Bloom taxonomy level and used verbs from the second level up. In Figure 8, it is shown that most of the courses employ verbs from the second to the fifth level of the taxonomy.

Table 1: Used verbs for documenting Learning Outcomes for 21 courses. Sorted according to their popularity showing the percentage of courses that used them.

Usage	Verb (level)*	Usage	Verb (level)
57.14%	Recognise (2)*	19.05%	Design (4)
42.86%	Use (3)	14.29%	Select (6)
38.10%	Calculate (4)	14.29%	Assess (5)
38.10%	Analyse (4)	14.29%	Describe (2)
28.57%	Apply (3)	14.29%	Define (1)
28.57%	Develop (5)	9.52%	Design (5)
19.05%	Create (4)	9.52%	Construct (5)
19.05%	Distinguish (4)	9.52%	Revise (6)

*Verb level according to the Bloom taxonomy in parenthesis

Table 2: Percentage of courses supporting specific generic skills.

Courses	Generic Skills
85.7%	Autonomous work
76.2%	Problem Solving
57.1%	Decision-making
47.6%	Time Management
47.6%	Computer Skill
42.9%	Research, analysis and synthesis of data
42.9%	Promoting free, creative and inductive thinking
42.9%	Numeracy
38.1%	Project design and Management
33.3%	Teamwork
33.3%	Written communication

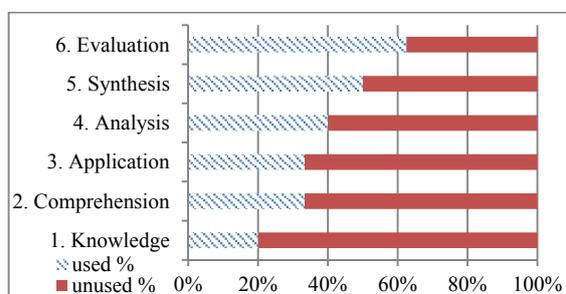


Figure 7: Percentage of the available verbs used by the tutors.

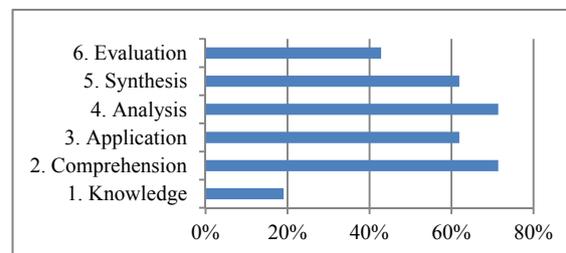


Figure 8: Percentage of the courses employing verbs from the different Bloom taxonomy levels.

5 CONCLUSIONS

We have presented a web application to support the academic course outlining process in a student-centered approach. Our aim was to aid the tutor in outlining her/his courses, and our preliminary results show that we are in the right track as our users were satisfied with the developed system. However, as the design of the database progressed we became aware that more information could be later extracted from the data. We presented some first results based on the user acceptance trial.

According to the ABET guidelines (Felder & Brent, 2003; ABET 2019-2020) for Engineering Schools the curricula must be designed with specific (although abstract) outcomes in mind (top-bottom approach). Indicatively, the revised student outcomes, which describe what engineering students are expected to know and be able to do by the time of graduation, in terms of knowledge, skills, and behaviors, are outlined in Baccalaureate and in Master's level in ABET 2019-2020 criteria.

Based on our database, we can use a bottom-up approach and discover abstract outcomes from the specific ones. Thus, we can aggregate our findings and find out what generic skills and general learning outcomes are strengthened by a learning path.

There are multiple directions to follow now. One is to establish this practice in our University and extract more information about curricula, departments and schools within it. This will be a great decision support tool when redesigning the curricula. Moreover, we can offer services, in the form of a recommender system, to the students who can plan their courses selection based on the skills they want to enhance.

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