Incompatible enactments of learning outcomes? Leader, teacher and student experiences of an ambiguous policy object

Proliferating claims have been made for Learning Outcomes (LOs) potential to re-shape higher education: as forces for transparency and harmonisation, new forms for measurement or a format that fundamentally challenges traditional teaching and learning. Evidence of their actual influence remains sparse, however. This analysis of 45 interviews with university teachers, students and leaders from England and Norway investigates their experiences of LOs. The results suggest LOs are received as an ambiguous policy object, resulting in varied interpretations and uses. However, two persistent tendencies emerge. While LOs have been introduced in relatively flexible 'process' forms, which can support reflection and communication around teaching practices, respondents describe pressures to develop more high-level, standardised and measureable 'product' LOs. Tensions between the forms seem likely to reduce the scope for LOs to play a role in support teaching and learning practices.

Keywords: learning outcomes; Bologna process; policy enactment; comparative policy

Learning outcomes as a central reform in European higher education

Learning outcomes (LOs) are increasingly central and prominent features in the rhetoric and aims of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Their significance is driven by their constitutive role in European Qualifications Frameworks and the Bologna process (Sin 2014). In the European Qualification Framework (EQF) learning outcomes are defined as "Statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning"[1] and they are represented as a necessary more precise way of expressing educational achievements, which can be applied to all

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[1] Overview of the European Qualifications Framework http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm

levels and types of learning and can therefore help to link up and compare between levels.

By providing a standard format to describe educational achievements LOs are central to efforts pursuing harmonization, enhanced transparency and comparability (Adam 2008; Maher, 2004). Despite their relatively straightforward description, LOs are presented as offering solutions to address a wide range of thorny issues facing contemporary higher education (HE). They are presented as a way to meet widespread demands for detailed and robust information about the impact of university degrees for individuals and society (ENQA 2010) and that quality assurance processes must assess what students actually gain from higher education more directly (Stensaker & Sweetman, 2014). LOs are also presented as a key intervention to maintain and enhance educational quality in the context of ever-larger, and more varied student bodies, and as encouraging a fundamental shift away from traditional teaching towards learning-focused or student-centred approaches (Adam 2004, 2008; Allan 2006; Otter 1992). In particular, LOs are argued to move away from university teaching practices characterised by vague and implicit aims and expectations, by providing a standard format for clear, detailed information about courses (Maher, 2004). In turn, this clarity can foster greater alignment of course aims, activities and assessments and help students achieve more (Biggs, 2011).

LOs have also been as argued to be a way that European reforms can 'drill down' and gain more direct purchase on curricula and course content (Schomburg & Teichler 2011). The mechanisms allowing for such 'ground level' influence are rarely elaborated, but seem likely to include their use as explicit standards linked to accreditation and quality assessment (Sin 2014) for example where new quality assurance processes require not only LO-based course descriptions but explicitly linked

assessment practices (Stensaker & Sweetman 2014). LOs have clearly evolved to promise much more than their original role as a formal alignment or harmonization tool; Lassnigg concludes that the EQF and LOs can be seen as "an attempt to implement a new governance system at the policy level which promises to change practice in a straightforward way. Thus, the QFs [qualification frameworks] based on learning outcomes are meant to be feasible reform instruments that might change the relationships between actors, the system architecture and pedagogical practice." (2012:300).

Meanwhile, research on LOs implementation has tended to focus on their introduction into formal qualification frameworks (Caspersen et al. 2011). A handful of comparative, national and institutional case studies have started to investigate how LOs are used by actors at the national and sub-national level. Lassnigg (2012) concludes that LOs do have a potential influence in Austrian education governance, and may come to shape practice and pedagogy, though there is little evidence of this as yet. Sin (2014) identifies considerable variations in the interpretation and impact of LOs in England, Portugal and Denmark, and finds they lack relevance to students. Brooks et al. (2014) find students' perceptions and use of LOs is typified by confusion and mixed reactions regarding their influence on learning. LOs influence on planning, teaching and management within degree-level education remains under-evidenced, and initial research suggests significant ambiguity and variation in how they are received, raising questions about what might explain or drive this apparent variety. This analysis addresses these areas, investigating how LOs are interpreted and enacted by teachers, students and leaders in degree programmes, and what might account for observed variations across diverse settings.

Perspectives on the implementation of international education policy

As a European reform intended to support harmonization, it may be tempting to assume LO approaches can be investigated through relatively standardized, top-down processes: ideas formulated at the European 'core' being gradually applied within national systems, then assessed to see if they work as intended. However, studies of international higher education reforms show that, even where similar formal structures and language are developed, policy enactment often varies, shaped by national traditions and systems (Kogan et al. 2006; Paradeise et al. 2009; Bleiklie et al. 2012). We cannot, therefore, assume that the formal adoption of LOs into national qualification frameworks signals significant harmonization or change in practice.

The theoretical debates around LO approaches suggest considerable scope for ambiguity and variety. Prøitz's (2010) review shows that theoretical discussions around LOs span divergent uses and roots, ranging from process-oriented and open-ended outcomes that align with socially-oriented and constructivist perspectives on learning, to result-oriented, full-ended and assessable outcomes that imply behaviourist and linear learning. Prøitz also describes how LOs may be presented as tools primarily for planning and developing educational practices, or tools focused on accountability and oversight (ibid). Hussey & Smith (2008) argue that the term 'learning outcomes' is applied too widely and that the relatively specific LOs suited to individual teaching-learning events are necessarily of a different type to broad, intended outcomes which are applied to whole courses. The lack of theoretical clarity identified by many authors (Allan 1996; Adam 2004; Prøitz 2010) also underpins many critics concerns that prescriptive or narrow applications of LO ideas could reduce or undermine the kind of learning and pedagogic practices required in higher education (Smyth & Dow 1998; Biesta 2009). Pedagogic perspectives on outcome-based teaching also suggest ways that diverse degree programme settings could lead to ambiguity and variety in

practices. LOs seem to be applied differently in traditional, disciplinary-bounded courses in comparison to more vocationally-oriented ones (Dahlgren et al. 2008). Apparently 'common' or generic LOs are understood very differently by academics across disciplines (Barrie 2004) and disciplines seem to shape both the kinds of outcomes expected, and the teaching approaches used to reach them (Entwistle 2005).

Learning outcomes in contemporary higher education are a complex, contested feature, linked to much broader European reform agendas, with evidence so far suggesting a mixed record in how much, and how consistently, they promote changes in practice. In light of this, a 'policy enactment' approach is taken here, which anticipates the possibility of divergence and unintended results. This perspective, illustrated by work by those such as Sin (2014) Saunders (2011) and Ball, Maguire & Braun (2012), focuses on the complex processes of ground-level implementation, and how policy ideas or tools are re-shaped and interpreted *prior to* and *through* enactment. It focuses attention on the perspectives and behaviours of those involved in the day to day work of planning, teaching and organizing education. Sin's (2014) concept of 'policy objects' also helps to clarify how LOs are positioned in this study, emphasising that objects such as LOs are often ambiguous and vague when seen in isolation from wider, related agendas and that they often only find stable meaning and influence as they are gradually embedded in practice (Sin 2014). LOs are approached not as a 'stand-alone' policy tool, but as one 'discrete preoccupation' within the Bologna process, which inevitably involves many other actions and instruments (e.g. ECTS, degree frameworks and LOs) (Sin, 2014). Their movement into practice is understood as involving dual processes of 'ontology' and 'enacted ontology'(Sin, 2014); essentially what actors believe the object to be, and what the object becomes as it is enacted. This approach echoes Ball's (1993) view of policy as both 'text' and 'discourse'; text referring to attempts to encode and

communicate policy, and discourse involving the complex processes through which texts are interpreted, acted on and transformed.

Approach and methodology: comparative policy enactment

This analysis focuses on the enactment of LOs as described by a range of educational actors, drawn from varied degree programmes. It seeks to clarify 1) how LOs are interpreted and enacted in diverse national and disciplinary settings, 2) what might explain identified variations and 3) how patterns identified relate to contested claims about the nature and influence of LOs. These aims are supported by comparative cases allowing an investigation of how LOs are related to and accommodated within varied national and disciplinary settings, and by a dual focus on how actors *interpret* the meaning/nature of LOs, and perceive *changes in practice* as linked to LOs.

The cases chosen here, England and Norway, can be seen as outliers to the European norm both in terms of key features of their university systems and how LO ideas arrived in each higher education system. While England and Norway have developed similar HE structures, monitoring systems and credit systems (Kogan et al. 2006), and these alignments are strengthened by both countries' application of the EQF, England can be seen as a European outlier in terms of its highly marketised, high-fee system. England is also unusual in how extensively LOs were present in higher education ahead of the Bologna process (Helgøy & Homme 2013); outcome-based learning was already established in curricula and course descriptors in many areas, via subject benchmarks, accreditation bodies' specifications and most vocational qualifications. LOs emerged gradually within the English system, accompanied by a long-standing a national preoccupation with defining generic graduate skills (Washer 2007). LOs have also become an important feature in the English quality assurance landscape, with both the

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Quality Code stressing their role in aligning qualifications and building explicit links between programmes and assessment (QAA, 2012).

In contrast, Norway adopted outcome-based qualifications frameworks relatively late and abruptly (Helgøy & Homme 2013). LOs only emerged as a feature in education policy over the last decade or so, with the 2006 Knowledge Promotion reform ('Kunnskapsløftet') starting the shift from an input to outcome orientation (Prøitz 2014a). This shift has been encouraged both by the national quality assurance body (NOKUT) and Bologna processes, which provided the impetus and format for a rapid uptake of an EQF-aligned framework (Helgøy & Homme 2013). Outcome-based forms of programme design and quality assurance have developed rapidly, despite Norwegian higher education being traditionally heavily input-oriented, and used to qualifications based on time or duration. Norway is also unusual as one of a shrinking group of countries with free higher education and generous student support. A fuller discussion of the development of LO policies in the two countries, and their broader comparative features, can be found in Michelsen et al. (2016).

To investigate the interpretation and enactment of LOs across such varied contexts it was important to avoid limiting the study to a single definition or narrow typology of LOs. Instead, this analysis builds on the work by Prøitz (2010) and Hussey and Smith (2008) which together maps the *likely potential terrain* of the LO object in higher education. Prøitz's (2010) two axes are combined with Hussey & Smith's 'level of use', to provide a 3 axes model which guides and supports the comparative analysis, as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1. Potential interpretations and enactments of learning outcomes in HE (based on Prøitz 2010; and Hussey & Smith 2008)

FIGURE 1 HERE

The analysis is based on interviews with 45 respondents at two Norwegian and two English universities. The Norwegian cases were selected first, to provide regional variation between two traditional, research-intensive universities. Two degree programmes were selected to provide a disciplinary contrast, with one professionally-oriented STEM and one a broad humanities programme chosen at each institution. English cases were identified to provide to match the Norwegian cases as far as possible (by status, relative size and location) and similar degree programmes to those selected in Norway were also identified (in terms of subject and degree structure). For each of the resulting 8 degree cases, interviews typically included the head of department, head of programme (referred to in quotes as 'leaders') and teaching staff. Staff were recruited both through heads of department and by research-team requests based on online profiles. Departments were asked to help set up interviews with second-year students, ideally those acting as class representatives (in Norway) or taking an active role in class feedback (in England). Interviews were largely one-to-one, with a few respondents in small groups. Much of the analysis focuses on responses from the 26 members of staff, although views from the 19 student respondents are drawn on where relevant. Notes and transcriptions from the interviews were analysed in NVivo software With an initial code frame based on the three axes of variation above and the interview guide. The guide elicited respondents' own interpretations of LOs and reflections on how practices or changes in teaching, assessment, management or oversight were related to them. Emergent codes and sub-codes were added as analysis proceeded, to capture areas of

particular emphasis or discord. In this way the analysis was guided by the theoretical and analytical lenses, but not limited to it. In terms of limitations, the data are from four traditional universities, so do not cover a full range of HE institution types. Furthermore, the way respondents were selected (often with input from heads of department) means they may well be more highly engaged with efforts to implement LOs that the average lecturer or student, and particularly dissenting or critical voices may have been missed.

Results

In summary, LOs are received as an ambiguous object, made sense of by relating them to local practices and priorities. Despite a weak sense of exactly what LOs are, or are intended to do, they are perceived as leading to shifts in teaching and management, although these shifts are more explicit and substantial in Norway than England. Teachers and managers describe considerable efforts to make sense of what LOs are, should be and can do for them and their students. Tensions arise in developing LOs for simultaneous use in teaching practice (at the module level) and as a way to clarify or summarise learning over a whole degree. While teachers and students report LOs can help clarify course aims and expectations, the extent to which full and explicit description of all learning involved is achievable, or desirable, is questioned by some. The influence of LOs on steering and management is vague but anticipated to become more significant; teachers and leaders recognise that LOs as provide opportunities for new indicators and oversight around teaching and learning, although these opportunities are yet to be fully exploited. Despite considerable variations in interpretation and enactment across cases, two broad and stable tendencies emerge. LOs are at work in degree programmes in a 'process' form, used to reflect on and review teaching practices and communicate about student learning; they also exert influence in a 'product' form,

as a way to describe, assess and potentially monitor outputs and quality. These results are presented and illustrated in more depth in the following sections.

Awareness of learning outcomes

The status and salience of LOs as a policy object varies between the countries. In English cases, they are a long-standing idea, albeit with renewed prominence. Staff described LOs as somewhat 'nebulous' or 'a box to be filled out' in formal course documentation or a re-labelling of prior 'aims and objectives' terms. Leaders were likely to relate LOs to quality assurance or institutional interests identifying graduate outcomes. Among students, LOs were more familiar as a feature of secondary education, although some were aware of them in course descriptions.

> As a practicing lecturer I don't really think about it… It's more like a bureaucratic exercise. It's making sure that we're following the syllabus that is set down. But not much more than that... To me it's a bit of a nebulous concept and it's difficult to differentiate between an aim and a learning outcome.
> (England, STEM, Head of Department)

In Norway, the term learning outcomes ('læringsutbytte') was more immediately familiar as part of ongoing, high-profile changes: respondents had been updating course descriptions to meet policy and quality assurance rules understood to require outcome formulations. The 'push' for LOs was related to the updated national Qualification Framework and Bologna reforms, and as part of wider changes focused on teaching quality. The term was generally more familiar to Norwegian students too, who recognised the language as a key part of course descriptions.

The enactment of LOs over different levels of practice (axis 3)

While the familiarity and profile of LOs varied between the countries, respondents described similar steps, stages and challenges in using them. It was generally understood that degree programmes require at least two levels of outcomes: those for specific courses or modules, and a set of broad outcomes for the whole degree programme. Departments in Norway were still actively re-working courses using LO formats, some starting with whole degree LOs and working downwards, most building upwards from module LOs. Whichever approach was described, respondents noted that finding LOs that 'worked' at both levels, and 'linked up', was challenging. Developing degree-level LOs involved discussion and negotiation among all those teaching within a programme, to clarify over-arching goals and priorities.. However, the resulting degree-level LOs were often described as so broad or general that they were hard to relate to course-level activities or outcomes.

> We began with formulating learning outcomes for the programme level, to get a more overarching view. Then last year we started the same process at the course level. Now we can see that we will have to go back to the programme level again, and adjust the outcomes in response to that... The responsibility [of the programme leader] in terms of the big picture is clearer than before. (Norway 4, STEM, Leader)

In other cases, the process started with individual teachers being encouraged or required to re-express what their modules provide students with in the 'new' language of outcomes. Flexibility and 'ownership' were noted as important principles in this process, to avoid resistance or non-cooperation.

> You have to try to develop a strong sense of ownership among the decision makers, who always include new staff coming in. But what we've done in the work so far made sure that everyone knew what we were talking about (with outcome descriptors)… Seen in that way we have worked both from the top down and the bottom up. (Norway 4, Humanities, Leader)

In English cases, as LOs had generally been in place for some time, course-level outcomes were relatively familiar and widely used, while programme level outcomes were typically seen as a rarely-used formality. Despite the lack of emphasis on whole degree outcomes, the English cases generally demonstrated a clear, shared understanding about 'where students need to get to', with little reference to outcomes. Instead the feeling that any degree programme 'hangs together' well for students seemed to be based on ongoing collaboration and communication within stable staff teams, stability in course organisation and structure and constructive oversight from heads of programmes or teaching and learning committees. The relative lack of interest in degree level outcomes was also related to the perceived difficulty of identifying a set of 'core' outcomes in modular degrees, where students 'pick and mix' degree content.

In both countries, then, developing and enacting LOs was experienced as demanding several stages, to attempt to balance and align functions related to identifying 'common core' (degree level outcomes), and to attempts to capture and convey individual teachers' intentions and expectations (course level outcomes).

Interestingly, there was little evidence of LOs being put to work in specific teaching and learning events (during lectures, classes or tasks). Explanations for this related to the sense that even course level outcomes often too broad or vague to be useful in teaching, as the outcomes they attempt to capture are typically emerge over a set of learning

events.

> This is where the dichotomy of intended learning outcomes is – they are essential
> in that we need to know what we're doing – but they cannot be of any practical use
> because they are too vague. The link between them and what we actually do on the
> ground is too indistinct, or can go in such different ways within the school.
> (England A1, Humanities, Lecturer)

Enacting LOs in teaching or management (axis 2)

LOs are not seen as purely 'formal' and are described as influential in aspects of teaching (planning and preparing courses) and management or steering (coordinating courses and attempts to influence practices). The development of ongoing negotiation around learning outcomes was seen by many as a way to trigger valuable reflection and discussion among colleagues, and some changes in practice. In Norway, LOs were described as providing opportunities to focus efforts on teaching (as opposed to research) and open up a 'private' and individualistic teaching culture to oversight. This challenged traditional views that lecturers 'own' their subject area, forcing them to be more explicit in explaining courses to students and one another. In doing so, LOs were seen as creating new opportunities for managers and programme leaders to intervene in teaching performance or to reform courses seen as too 'niche' or outdated.

> The cultural issue is key… A lot of people have probably worked separately for a
> long time, and now more and more they can see that what is good for the
> department also is good for them. (Norway 4, STEM, lecturer)

In general then, the LO format was thought to offer some ways of clarifying and communicating expectations around teaching and learning, and be particularly helpful for less experienced teachers. More subtle influences on teaching and learning practices

and interactions were also suggested. In both countries, LOs were recognised as one way staff could communicate more explicitly with students. While this was generally positively regarded, concerns were raised that not all kinds of learning can be conveyed in an outcomes-form, and that there are limits to how much it is possible or desirable to describe all learning in higher education. Disciplinary differences were apparent in the kinds of learning that were experienced as hard to accommodate in LO forms. Outcomes in STEM subjects were described as largely 'content-based' and fairly easy to express: the desired outcome is 'to master the material' related to a specific area. However, less content-based aspects of STEM and humanities subjects could be problematic. Lecturers raised concerns that there are inevitable limits to how far one can or should make all the potential outcomes of learning explicit, particularly in cases where: the nature of the achievement is intangible or highly subjective (an interesting, original argument); students should be developing their judgement about which approach among many will work best, informed by on and the conventions of their subject (a good essay); or where specification of expected performance becomes 'spoon feeding' or encourages a 'tick box' approach. LOs were therefore felt to have significant limitations, and a strict or over-zealous application was seen as having the potential to constrain or undermine educational variety and rigour.

> I've been won over to the idea of specifying in more detail what students should do…So I tend to set tasks where there's a higher degree of clarity about what students should do. But there is a point where I don't want to say anymore because I think they should know – if I ask them what are the key concepts here I don't want to list them all out, I want them to tell me. (England 2, Humanities, Lecturer)

There was little sign of LOs being used in steering or management in explicit or heavy-handed ways. However, respondents in both countries felt LOs made degree

programmes more steerable, creating new opportunities for oversight and management of teaching, and reducing teachers' autonomy to decide teaching priorities and formats. In both countries, the development and monitoring of LOs and course plans a key opportunity for leaders to require that teachers explain their work and potentially for them to challenge teachers or courses deemed problematic. In Norway in particular, the new role of 'programme leaders' (typically senior lecturers responsible for oversight of a degree programme) was important in managing the development and use of LOs and this was seen to mark a reduction in teachers' traditional autonomy.

Concerns about more explicit and extensive use of LOs in management and steering related to the way they seem to establish a language and structure well-suited to measurement or new performance indicators. In England several respondents thought it inevitable that LOs will be used in institutional and national monitoring or comparison. In Norway, several respondents anticipated that the national quality assurance agency (NOKUT) will become increasingly interventionist in reviewing and assessing intended outcomes and their links to final assessments.

> I think that the implications are that these things will become increasingly formalised and they will be attached to performance indicators, and those will undoubtedly filter down to the school and subject level… I think it's inevitable, particularity as students are increasingly made aware of 'what they can expect' they will then be in a position all the time to as 'no you're not meeting this one', and 'you are meeting this one'… (England 2, Humanities, Leader)

LOs perceived nature and meaning (axis 1)

The nature of LOs was discussed in relation to respondents' ideas about what LOs could (and could not) capture and what kind of form they were expected to take. Key concerns

and confusion related to how much specification, measurability and pre-determination is possible, or desirable, in degree-level education.

While outcomes related to knowing of/about key content or simple skills were seen as relatively easy to express, other aspects of learning raised concerns. Respondents described difficulties using LOs to express learning due to: the varied nature of the material to be taught, varied expectations and foci of students, and the issue of necessary or desirable ambiguity within learning and assessment processes. If students need to demonstrate their judgment to develop their own, creative solutions, or more or less sophisticated execution or understanding of key concepts, then LO forms became problematic. While more prominent in humanities cases, these concerns were mentioned by some STEM respondents. This led several teachers to question the idea that LOs lead to clearer or more valid assessment.

> You can have outcomes that students should be able to do this process and should be able to go from this point to this, but the kind of battle plan to get there is not always well defined or the way on which they would do it. Sometimes you can tackle a problem in four of five different ways. So you can write LOs for one route but not necessarily all." (England 1, STEM, Head of Department)

Respondents suggested that even detailed, descriptive course-level outcomes offered little help in solving the thorny issues of how to judge and grade students' performance; substantial work was needed to translate course outcomes into marking rubrics to map out what an LOs' performance over a range of levels or grades would look like.

> The correspondence between learning outcomes descriptors and grade descriptions is not clear/obvious. There's always a gap between learning outcomes descriptors and character (grade) descriptions. (Norway 1, Humanities, Leadership)

Demands for strict correspondence and links between intended LOs and final assessment processes were also seen as potentially problematic. An over-specification of expected performance was thought to risk 'dumbing down' courses, encouraging students to take an instrumental approach. There were also questions about how close alignment between 'intended' LOs and assessment would leave room for cases where students perform very well, but in unexpected ways. The issue of selecting appropriate and relevant LOs to summarise the outcomes of whole degree programmes raised similar tensions about the gap between descriptions of typical 'intended' LOs and the variety of students' actual outcomes. The STEM programmes' professional orientation meant they could predict graduates' destinations reasonably well, and so devise key outcomes expected for most students. In the humanities, however, varied module combinations and students' own eclectic interests and post-university destinations made identifying degree-level outcomes very challenging.

Contextual explanations for variation: LOs as an adaptable object?

Respondents expressed uncertainty about exactly what LOs are 'for' and why they were introduced. Perhaps because of this perceived vagueness, respondents often made reference to the challenges they perceived as most significant to their department, institution or national system in describing how LOs were being, or should be, used.

The need to recruit students in a high-fee landscape was the defining concern in English cases. This was felt to focus attention on student choice, satisfaction and the need to maintain a good reputation for teaching quality and graduate outcomes. LOs were seen as offering some ways of responding to these pressures, by providing a more explicit way to tell students what 'value' their degree would provide them with, or even as a kind of contract, explaining what they could expect in return for their fees.

I mean what's happening at the moment is very bound up with the introduction of

tuition fees. There is a lot going on to do with saying, well what will students

expect, what do they actually need, and how do those two things relate to each

other?

(England 1, Humanities, Head of Department)

We maybe tend to see them as a defensive shield to be able to say to the students

after the modules, "look, we told you what you needed to learn, we've assessed

you on those criteria, you have no complaints if you haven't hit that requirement.

(England 2, STEM, Lecturer)

In Norway, the broader changes and challenges related to ongoing reorganisation

involved in alignment with European structures and standards, and efforts to

'modernise' and improve teaching. LOs were seen as a tool that must have been

introduced to help efforts to 'modernise' teaching and to focus more attention on course

planning and delivery.

The University has not [in the past] focused so much on how to develop good

teachers, but on research. We have no guidelines or requirements in relation to the

role of the teacher. That says something. We have to get away from 'private

practice' and develop teaching skills to get from the goals of teaching into our

actual activities. (Norway 1, Humanities, Leader)

These varied interpretations show how the same policy object became accepted as a

relevant, even necessary, response to distinct challenges facing each national system.

Discussion: incompatible tendencies in LO enactment

The results have been discussed in relation to the 3 axes in figure 1, as a way to unpack

the range of ways LOs are being interpreted and put to work. In this section, the patterns found across the three axes together are related to one another to identify broader tendencies and trajectories in LO enactment. Despite national and local variations, two common tendencies i emerge. These can be summarised as involving 'process' and 'product' forms of LOs, which have divergent natures and applications (see figure ii). While these forms are developing in parallel in most of the cases studied, figure 2 illustrates fundamental tensions between them, making their longer term compatibility questionable.

Figure 2. Two tendencies in LOs interpretation and enactment in university degree programmes

FIGURE 2 HERE

While the 3-axes model might seem to imply a 'spectrum' of potential LO meanings or uses, the results from this analysis suggest a fairly sharp division between the tendencies. The 'process' form reflects the way respondents describe LOs development and introduction into degree programme, and ongoing work with them in relation to teaching. This form requires teachers to engage in the work of translating course aims and content into LO formats, and the nature of LOs at this stage remains fairly flexible and able to accommodate more idiosyncratic interpretation and application. The 'product' form reflects a common trajectory once these descriptive, teaching-focused LOs are established, where more fine-grained and varied LOs are gradually stabilised and summarised towards 'whole degree' outcomes. The development of 'product' outcomes typically places more emphasis on common, generic or employment focused LOs and attempts to describe the 'typical' student. As respondents noted, the usefulness and relevance of LOs for teaching and learning rapidly diminishes as they are aggregated upwards and to more generic outcomes. The drive to develop 'product' LOs

does not seem to be related to efforts to improve teaching and learning, but to perceived demands to demonstrate alignment between intended outcomes and assessments, and to make student and course performance more measureable and comparable. It is also important to note that these 'process' and 'product' forms contrast in how students relate to, and are positioned by them. Process LOs seem to provide one way teachers and students can communicate about aims and expectations, potentially allowing students to engage in courses and learning in different ways. In contrast, the 'product' form seems to address students less as learners and more as consumers.

The results of this analysis echo some of the arguments put forward by the authors who developed the three axes. Prøitz (2014b) suggested that the top right and bottom left quadrants formed by the 'nature' and 'use' axes define more common and coherent versions of LOs: teachers tend to look at and use outcomes as a teaching and curriculum development tools, implementing them in flexible ways; in contrast, the LOs developed for and used in management and steering are more results-oriented and concrete. Prøitz also sees signs of a results-oriented understanding becoming more dominant in Norwegian policy documents over time, accompanying a greater focus on comparability and accountability (2014b). The addition of Hussey & Smith's (2008) 'level of use' axis does not make much difference to the overall nature of the two tendencies, but does focus attention on the multi-step and multi-level processes involved in enacting LOs, and how this evolves over time. Hussey & Smith argue it is misleading to use the term LOs to refer to their application in specific teaching events and in describing whole degree outcomes, and this certainly seems to reflect the experience of respondents.

The apparent incompatibility of the tendencies, and the dynamics of interpretation and enactment emerging from this analysis, suggests three possible scenarios for the future of LOs. The first sees both forms remain in parallel, but any further implementation

falter: both process and product forms may settle in as largely formal or administrative features, with little role or influence on teaching or management practices. Alternatively, both process and product forms may continue to be enacted, but this will require significant ongoing efforts to balance and accommodate the varied, specific and changeable LOs relevant for teaching and communication, with some limited number of more concrete, core outcomes. A third scenario sees 'product' LOs take priority in response to demands for more explicit links between LOs and assessment, and concrete information about what students get from their degree. This will inevitably limit the space and flexibility needed for 'process' forms to operate.

Conclusions and implications

This analysis has sought to go beyond simply describing actors' experiences of LO implementation in each country, to suggest what factors might account for observed variations and to offer some credible trajectories for their influence on higher education. The wider implications of the results are discussed here, along with some reflections about the approach used and avenues for further research.

As with many international policy reforms in higher education, proponents and critics of LOs provide a great variety of explanations for their intended and likely influence. By looking at their interpretation and enactment across varied cases this analysis has largely side-stepped the question of how far LOs are working 'as intended'. It has not primarily sought to evaluate LO approaches but to identify patterns and emerging stability around their meaning and influence. The results are in line with some positive and some critical views. It seems most degree programme actors think that having to develop LO formats often triggers valuable, constructive conversations between staff and students, offering a new way of discussing the aims and expected results of degree-

level learning. At the same time, teachers and leaders report feeling under pressure to develop more 'common', high-level and more measureable LOs than they think are relevant or useful in teaching.

To some extent, the variation and local interpretations of LOs found here is in line with other recent studies of LO implementation, describing variety and local translation of LOs in diverse countries (Sin 2014; Lassnigg 2012) as well as confusion and mixed reactions among the actors tasked with using them (Brooks et al.,2014). LOs do not seem to offer immediate answers to university actors pursuing a balance between clarity and over-simplification. There are also few signs that they are triggering significant changes in teaching practices or students learning, via constructive alignment or student-centred approaches.

However, while Lassnigg concludes that the variety around LO implementation means that "neither critics' warnings, nor proponents' expectations of LOs are likely to be met" (2012:299) this analysis does not support such a conclusion. Instead it suggests that product forms of LOs appear to be developing a position in degree programmes which could see them exert considerable influence as management or comparison tools in institutional or national quality assurance processes. If such a scenario were to unfold, it seems likely to align with warnings from critics such as Smyth & Dow (1998) Biesta (2009) and Hussey & Smith (2008), that LOs will not support but undermine teaching and learning, narrowing the scope of higher learning and encouraging instrumentalism in the interest of standardisation and measurement.

The three axes model, and the process and product forms described here, may be useful tools for future research that attempts to get beyond a broad sense of LOs being 'ambiguous' or 'contested', and to clarify the specific challenges and steps which lead

to these divergent positive or negative influences on teaching and learning. One particularly fruitful avenue for future research might be comparisons of how LOs are enacted in different disciplinary contexts and in more professionally-oriented courses, to see if and how LO enactments are shaped by and related to specific accreditation and quality assurance regimes. The 3 axes model and process and product forms may also be useful concepts for teachers, leaders and students working with LOs. Clarifying that certain kinds of LOs *can* offer a format for communicating about learning in higher education that teachers and students find helpful, but that they simultaneously create risks of over-definition of outcomes, narrowing and an excessive focus on measurability, may mark a step towards actors in degree programmes finding creative ways to navigate and balance the challenges and tensions involved in LO enactment

The comparative approach in this analysis has helped to illustrated variety in how LOs are understood and enacted. However, the evidence of two, highly consistent forms of LOs in the contrasting settings of Norway and England, could be seen as caution against relying too heavily on policy perspectives that anticipate and look for policy translation and variation. There is a risk of neglecting forces that encourage and foster consistency and stability in international policy objects when focusing on local ontologies and enactments. Despite their contrasting implementation histories and local interpretations, LOs in both countries appear to be experiencing a similar trajectory: an initial introduction as a teaching, planning and communication process which encourages widespread engagement and ownership is followed by steps which tend to narrow-down, prioritise concrete outcomes and generally 'tidy up' variety in the pursuit of 'product' forms. If the trajectory towards product forms described here is accurate, research will be needed to try and explain how initial variety in LOs is 'tamed' and reduced across diverse systems. Perhaps this relates to apparently diverse national

reform agendas actually involving common preoccupations with the pursuit of measurement and transparency, or perhaps due to quality assurance and accreditation regimes acting surprisingly consistently and effectively to constrain and channel the way reforms play out in local settings.

Sin's perspective (2014) has been helpful in supporting an alertness about the way processes of meaning making and enactment inform one another, and in suggesting ways that local, stable meanings of policy objects can develop by actors relating them to local 'bundles' of processes and reforms. In this case this captures the way those tasked with enacting LO approaches in degrees seem to 'fill in the blanks' in the vague LOs policy, by assuming they must be tools intended to address whatever local issues are most pressing.

Lassnigg suggests that the core issue in most arguments around LOs is a "problematic relationship between teaching and learning, assessment and management and control." (2012:304) and this absolutely captures the tensions identified here. The questions for future research on LOs are not about if they are 'working' or 'failing', but about finding ways to clarify how the meaning and applications of LOs stabilise over time, and the trade-offs that will be involved. Leader, teacher and student experiences in England and Norway suggest that LOs can only play a role in shaping and supporting teaching and learning if considerable space is left for variety and flexibility. On the other hand, LOs anticipated roles in harmonisation, transparency and measurement require or at least imply product forms. It seems unlikely that LOs can continue to be all things to all people, and choices will have to be made about which forms and functions are prioritised if they are to play a long-term role in higher education.

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