

Learning Outcomes within professional Contexts in Higher Education

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Abstract

With the policy of developing a, transparent and competitive European higher education sector learning outcomes (LOs) are attributed a foundation stone role in policy and curriculum development. A premise for the implementation of LOs is that they bear fundamentally similar, meaning across national, institutional or professional/disciplinary contexts. In contrast detractors, suggest that LOs cannot communicate precisely across programmes or national boundaries. With this as a backdrop, this investigation analyse how LOs are used to communicate what students are to learn and the extent to which the use of LOs drives standardisation. The analysis is based on a case study of how LOs are formulated in study programme documents in two professional education programmes in Norway and the UK. The findings of the study indicate that LOs can be considered to drive standardisation through the same presentation using bullet points and therefore on the surface being presented in a standardised form. The study also finds that LOs are framed in varied ways in the two countries and within the different study programmes and in a web of interconnected documents, this 'local' structural usage of LOs disrupts the 'foundation stone' role of the LO as a vehicle for standardisation and weakens the establishment of sameness across institutions and nations.

Key words: Learning outcomes, professional, higher education, teaching, nursing

Introduction

The aim of the study is to explore study programme documents in order to analyse how LOs are used to communicate what students are expected to learn and the extent to which the use of LOs drives standardisation. We have chosen to focus on programme areas that are preparing for specific professions (nurses and teachers). These are required by their professional bodies to guarantee that graduates have acquired certain knowledge and skills. Although there has been considerable research related to LOs, little have been written about their place as part of professional education . Unlike previous articles (Entwistle 2005) the importance of this paper is that it focuses exclusively on the professional contexts, which bring different challenges to higher education by being more directly related to a professional field of practice and with the involvement of stakeholders outside academia (Nordengraaf 2011).

A premise for the European policy implementation of LOs is that they bear a fundamentally similar, meaning across national, institutional or professional contexts (Kennedy et al. 2007, Allais 2012, Lassnigg 2012). LOs are attributed universal meanings that transcend contexts, which presupposes shared understanding of what they are and what demonstrating a particular LOs implies. Adam (2004, p. 2), states that

the main advantage of LOs is 'the clarity and precision they bring to any curriculum development process'. Adam (2004, p. 3) adds, 'there should be no confusion about their role, nature and significance, or the educational foundations of the Bologna process will be undermined'. In these perspectives, supporting the European policy of integrated, transparent and competitive higher education sector LOs are attributed a foundation stone role in policy and curriculum development, by increasing the level of preciseness in describing what students are expected to learn and, ensuring transparency across institutional and national boundaries.

While the implementation of LOs has been generally accepted as policy initiatives across the European higher education sector, the premises and implications for conceptualising knowledge and education has been questioned in research (Hargreaves & Moore 2000, James & Brown 2005, Hussey & Smith 2008, Prøitz 2010, Havnes & Prøitz 2016). A close-up exploration of the use of learning outcomes in programme documents addressed to students, as well as a transnational comparison is novel. This approach to the formulation of LOs and how they are communicated to students allows an exploration of a central tenant of Bologna's interpretation of learning outcomes. A key question is whether learning outcomes facilitate a shared international level understanding of a programme's graduate's capabilities. For the exploration of these issues we have examined study programme documents asking the following questions:

- Does the use of Learning Outcomes at study programme level vary across national contexts and across professional programmes and what implication does this have for learning outcomes as defining standards of Higher Education?

The analysis is based on a case study of how LOs are formulated in study programme documents in two different professional education contexts (undergraduate teacher and nurse education) in Norway and the UK. There are similarities between the UK and the Norwegian higher education systems structurally while at system level differences have been identified in terms of institutional hierarchy and in funding (Sweetman et al. 2014). Looking across the UK/Norway boundaries sheds light on the role of LOs in diverse ways: in the UK LOs were introduced in the early 1990s, as a pedagogical, curriculum development initiative and to meet the demand for greater accountability by UK Higher Education to stakeholders (Melton 1996, Hussey and Smith 2002). Norway has recently implemented LOs, largely driven by the European higher education reform process (Prøitz 2014).

The epistemology of learning outcomes and knowing

Before addressing our questions it is important to recognise, that outside of university bureaucracies LOs are a contested concept. While Allan (1996, p. 93) argues that making explicit what LOs mean implies entering a 'minefield of terminological confusion', Hussey and Smith (2002) suggest that LOs are so context bound as to have no meaning outside their subject boundaries. Within the community of LO supporters it is noted that there are diverse notions of LOs, by and large based on diverse conceptions of learning (Allan 1996, Prøitz 2010).

A significant aspect of the LO debate, in the context of professional education however is raised by Muller and Young (2014). They critique LO or outcome-based education generally in the perspective of an analysis of knowledge structures in higher education;

two 'polarised positions attempt to trump one another,' they argue (p. 128). There is a dispute between 'disciplinary knowledge' and 'relevant skills and knowledge' that 'goes to the heart of any debate about the purpose of universities, and indeed about the purpose of education' (ibid.). Disciplinary knowledge is abstract and generally emphasising conceptual understanding that is defined and legitimised from within the disciplines, and, forms the ground for disciplinary identity.

When the outcome is at the core of education it follows that 'there are multiple routes to mastery of an outcome, hence de-privileging the epistemic ladder that scaffolds the outcomes' (p. 135). Muller and Young do not elaborate particularly on the concept of epistemic ladder but here it is interpreted as referring to an ideal of placing conceptual knowledge prior to skills, also when it comes to professional practice. The core of their argument is that outcomes-based education challenges the fundamental basis for learning in higher education by putting 'being able to do' in the forefront and 'eclipse(s) the conceptual content' (137).

Professional programmes have knowledge elements from a set of disciplines. Disciplines are 'singulars', that is, there are 'clear boundaries between themselves', they 'construct special identities' through internal epistemic justification and they exhibit 'strong inner commitments' and 'disciplinary identity' (Bernstein 2000, p.131). In contrast, professional programmes are epistemic regions. They are justified and challenged both from inside and outside. Inside is a diverse disciplinary knowledge field, and outside is the market and government. This is particularly the case for the groups that have recently become categorised as university-based professions with an increasing emphasis on theoretical knowledge and conceptual reflection. In such professional programmes the external claim of relevance is stronger than in the traditional university disciplines.

The claim of relevance and the emphasis on practical competence in the professions could seem to justify LOs as an organising principle. However, Muller and Young take as a premise that disciplinary knowledge constitutes the basis also for applied disciplines. By horizontally listing a wide range of LOs, 'stated in 'can do' terms', outcomes-based education 'flattens the programmatic content and skills' that students need to learn to qualify as professionals and 'undermines the specialist knowledge base and the legitimacy of specialised knowledge communities in the disciplines'. There is a risk that 'outcomes or 'know how' knowledge [..may come to..] replace conceptual disciplinary knowledge' (2014, p. 137).

The approach in this study recognises that LO are a dominant feature of curriculum design of higher education across much of the World, with the two contrasting perspectives on LO described as background for this study. One approach taking LO as corner stones in curriculum development and the other rejecting LO as meaningfully describing what students are expected to learn because the internal, disciplinary constructs of knowledge are neglected. In this study we go beyond this controversy by empirically exploring how and the extent to which LO are used in practice as a means to define what students should learn in two professional programmes across two nations. The article is part of a wider research project on the implementation of LO in Norwegian higher education and started out as a comparison of two Norwegian institutions. The

study was later extended to include an international comparison, which explains why two Norwegian and one UK institutions were included.

Method

The research design of the study can be characterised as a case study (Yin 2006) which is suited to a research project that is informed either by a descriptive question or an explanatory question. The case study has been chosen because of its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence (Yin 1994: 4-8)—in this case, document data from varied contexts. Another relevant characteristic of the case study is that it does not represent a population or a universe, but aims to expand and generalise theories, hence analytical generalisations (Yin 1994: 10, Flyvbjerg 2011: 305). The unit of analysis (Yin 1994:22) is LOs as presented in programme documents, defined by six individual cases of study programmes within two different types of professional programmes at three universities, two in Norway and one in UK. The point of departure is programme plans. Documents have been selected through information-oriented (Flyvbjerg 2011: 307) and purposeful sampling strategies (Gall et.al 1996). The analysis focuses on the content of the documents. This is refined by using the lenses of credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability, and authenticity when reviewing the documentation (Stray, 1994, Carneiro et al, 2016). The credibility of the material can be said to be high as the materials have been collated from the individual institutions and are primary documentation associated with the individual programmes. In the process of analysis, focus has been kept on how LOs are explicitly presented, this includes the placement of LOs in the documents, their relation to other elements of the documents and the overall structure and content. The study programme documents have been read several times in a process of superficial examination, followed by a thorough examination and in depth-reading (Bowen 2009). This allows for a systematic approach to identify and extract relevant content of the documents studied. Material collected for the study is extensive, in compliance with the article format only a limited selection of extracts from the data material are presented to illustrate typical features of the documents and the main findings of the study.

Contexts of the study

The UK institution

The case-institution in the UK is a medium sized University with about 22,000 students. It teaches a range of subjects from the humanities to vocational subjects such as nursing and engineering. Prior to 1992 it was a polytechnic, from 1992 it converted to an autonomous university.

The UK has a diverse higher education system with a high level of autonomy for the institutions. Universities are responsible for quality assuring their programmes. Their processes for quality assurance are audited by the Quality assurance agency (QAA). The agency anticipates that universities take an approach to programme design based on LOs. The design of programmes is informed by subject benchmarks and professional standards. Largely professional bodies determine professional standards in the UK. In the case of nursing, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, which is autonomous from Government, determines the professional standards. For teaching the standards are decided by the government rather than professional bodies.

Expert panels of academics determine subject benchmarks; they are advisory for the programme, but act as significant reference points as content and goal comparators for Universities offering the same subject areas. They are also used as a measure for internal quality assurance when programmes are initially approved and are often used to help formulate LOs. It is up to each programme to design curricula that qualify candidates in accordance with the professional standards set by the relevant regulatory authority.

Academic standards are specified by the University and formulated as a separate set of LOs. At the University studied LOs are also categorised Graduate Attributes; that students are expected to possess when they graduate from the University.

The Norwegian institutions

The case-institutions in Norway are among the largest University Colleges in the country with about 17,000 – 20,000 students. Both have long traditions for professional studies such as teaching and nursing.

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), an independent expert body under the Ministry of Education and Research is the key regulatory external body in both nursing and teaching. It is the controlling authority for educational activity of all Norwegian universities, that approves the institutions' internal quality assurance systems and determines if the educational provision in HEIs meets national quality standards. National standards are described by national regulations, national frameworks for certain professional studies and in the National Qualifications framework (NQF). In contrast to the UK system, national standards are formulated as lists of LOs; set by NOKUT and certified by the Ministry of Education. However, the process of developing national standards predominantly includes academics teaching the programmes, plus representatives from labour and student unions.

Analysis and discussion

The document analysis focuses on similarities and difference in how LOs are framed in study programme documents. The analysis discovered variation in how LOs are manifest in programme documents along several thematic dimensions. In the following these findings are presented and discussed.

A web of learning outcomes

The point of departure for the study was the study programme plans. As the study preceded it became clear that these documents were anchored in more general policy documents (National Curricula or Frameworks in Norway and Professional Standards and Benchmarks in the UK) and further detailed in supplemental documents. This linkage of programme documents provided additional meaning of the LOs. Consequently, this finding made mapping of interlinked documents an important part of the study. Mapping this web-like formation of documents where the more concrete descriptions of LOs at programme level refer to the overall and generic aspects of LOs at department and institutional level provided richer data material and a more solid grounding for the study.

In total interlinked documents from five levels of the education systems have been identified. The five levels are; the national, the institutional, the study programme, the module and the level of structuring of teaching, learning and assessment (Table I).

Table I Overview of interlinked documents

In the Norwegian cases up to eight documents have been identified as key documents, here presented from the more general to the more specific. The two first are documents developed by the government. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is the national qualifications framework of which programme LOs descriptions are supposed to be written in accordance to (NOKUT 2011). The Ministry has also amended national framework regulations for professional courses, including teacher and nurse education. National guidelines for each subject field and module level supplement the National framework. While these guidelines are not mandatory and can be changed by the institutions, they are to a large degree copied in programme documents.

The programme plan builds on the national framework regulations, but is developed by the institution. It presents the programme in general descriptions of purpose, structure, and LOs. The module plan presents the structure, teaching and learning activities, syllabus, LOs and assessment scheme. Often this is the main document for communication between teachers and students, at some institutions study guides provide a more detailed plan for teaching and learning activities. In the teacher education there is also a Subject Plan describing the subject field and specifying four Modules, each with a set of LO. The study guide is more detailed, specifying content, selection of LOs, readings, teaching, assignments and assessment. It is often developed and provided by individual teachers while the module plan is more of a collaborative effort between teachers.

The UK university programme documents are by far more elaborate. There are national professional standards serving as descriptors of core competences that professionals are expected to be able to perform in a work context. In the context of the educational programme these professional standards are used for LOs in placement. Academic standards are specified by the University and formulated as a separate set of programme-specific LOs. The programme specifications in the UK cases are developed by academics working on each programme and approved through the internal quality assurance processes at institutional level. The Programme Handbook builds on the Programme Specifications elaborating on how the programme is designed, what is expected of students, etc. It provides students with the information they need about the programme as a whole including the assessment, module specifications and a reference guide for their studies over a period of time¹. The Module descriptions are brief, provide details about teaching, assignments and assessment, and often an assessment grid combining content-specific and programme (General Attributes) LOs. The mini guides

¹ In addition teacher training students have placement or practicum guides where the assessment of the students is solely related to the National Standards for QTS. The guide consists of the following categories that have been used on the curriculum documents at programme level: description of document, document structure, description of purpose and aims of the study, descriptions of learning activities, learning outcomes, standards, criteria, formative and summative assessment, references to other documents (regulations, national frameworks, standards).

are two sides-brief overview of the module, hand-in dates for assessments and a core reading list².

This web of documents involved in defining the LOs of the study programs illustrates the complexity of settings through which LOs exert their influence in these studies. In the UK institution each assessment might have its own marking criteria. These criteria may be linked to the declared module LOs, but they may also be criteria related to general academic skills. These criteria are indicative of general or 'assumed' LOs; which may not necessarily be formally stated.

The audiences for these documents vary, some being primarily addressed to institutions and academics, others to students. To some extent they express a development of descriptors from the general to the concrete, while in other respects they cover diverse aspect of the spectre of aims and expected LOs. What students are expected to learn cannot be inferred from focusing exclusively on any one of them. However, we do not expect students to read all these documents to come to terms with what they are expected to learn. As such, one might question the point of this elaborate system of levels of LOs. Yet they function, to allow academics in various ways to address their expectations in teaching, mentoring, assessment and text material to meet the requirements and interests of several stakeholders.

Standardisation and room for interpretation

All the programmes, lean on external regulatory bodies in the development of programme level LOs, however, more in the Norwegian institutions than the UK institution. Professional education must normally demonstrate that they meet the requirements of standards described by the regulator; the most transparent and easiest way to do this is to, parrot the source documents' language within the institution's own. In theory, this mechanism should lead to standardisation, with each institution producing similar programme documents.

This similarity is clearly seen in the LOs for education programmes across the two Norwegian universities. Both teacher education programmes in Norway copy LOs set by the National Framework. In Norway LOs are expressed in similar ways across these institutions and share the same pattern of articulation in nursing and teacher education. In both institutions the programme plans follow the knowledge, skills and general competence structure set by the National Qualification framework. The standard for study programme plans seems to have been applied across institutions and educational programmes. The same pattern can be identified in Module descriptions (Table II) where the LOs are formulated for each subject field. In teacher education the institutional documents highly overlaps with and copy from the national Framework, as well as the National guidelines.

Table II

This mimicking of the National programme handbook for teaching is not as obvious for the National programme handbook in nursing. One reason for this difference could be that the handbook for nursing has not been revised since the introduction of the National qualifications framework, whereas the handbook for teacher education has been revised in accordance with the formulations in the NQF.

² The mini handbook has been developed on request by students through the students' union.

Table III illustrates differences in LOs content-wise in terms of specificity. Both describe knowledge as something that is possessed and skills and general competences as abilities to act. LOs are described in broad, general terms, the ways of formulating are similar, however they are more explicitly related to nursing practice at institution A, whilst more concerned with professional formation with emphasis on collaborative work at institution B.

Table III

At the UK University there are complementary sets of LOs: Graduate Attributes at programme level formulated in academic terminology, content-related LOs at module level and Professional Standards applied as LOs in the context of placement and skills training. The list below indicates the graduate attribute in teacher education. The emboldened titles are the same across all programmes.

- **Academic literacy**
 - demonstrate an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the purposes, scope, structure and balance of school education and the Primary Curriculum;
- **Research literacy**
 - analyse and evaluate critically subject specific and multi-disciplinary literatures;
- **Critical self-awareness and personal literacy**
 - undertake systematic critical self-reflection, within the planning, teaching and assessment cycle;
- **Digital and information literacy**
 - use digital media responsibly and critically, to identify appropriate source material, support research, and enhance presentations;
- **Active citizenship**
 - show critical self-awareness their own beliefs, commitments and prejudices

Programme level LOs for Nursing are expressed in a similar way to Education, aligned to graduate attributes and seemingly more general and more ‘academic’ sounding, for example;

- **Academic literacy**
 - Deliver high quality essential care to all underpinned by a comprehensive understanding of nursing practice.
- **Research literacy**
 - Critically evaluate evidence to support conclusions or recommendations reviewing reliability, validity and significance of research and undertaking straightforward research tasks in relation to professional practice

The UK University Education Programme LOs, mention neither the knowledge the students should obtain nor the classroom skills they should have, even though the students must demonstrate that they have such. This illustrates the point, that some LOs within the curriculum may not be expressed as LOs, in terms of clear statements of what students are expected to learn. This indicates a hidden curriculum at play even when efforts are made to define clear LOs. Where the classroom skills are identified they are exclusively linked to assessment of placements and are articulated in relation to competences against the National standards

Programme LOs are also included in the module descriptions, articulated as complementary to content-/subject-specific module-level outcome descriptions, including personal attributes

standards (Table IV). At this level Graduate/Post-Graduate Attributes are referred to at the level of GA/PA headings.

Table IV

The module Mental Health Nursing with Adults of Working Age has 8 content-directed LOs and they are also linked to Graduate Attributes (Table V). It is also identified whether the LOs are taught, practised and/or assessed.

Table V

The content-specific LOs are the basis for assessment. How the LOs are taught and assessed are elaborated briefly in the Module Descriptions. The Module Descriptions often show a marking grid used to assess students' assignments. The grid further specifies the level of expected achievements for each module LO in relation to the Graduate Attributes / programme LOs.

Within nursing clinical competence is in part assessed using a practice assessment document (PAD) that covers a range of the professional standards and clinical skills. One of the activities is for the student to develop an action plan and set LOs for themselves. A form is given for how this is to be formulated, and an example given, (Table VI). This ipsative LOs and student designed LOs, is to some extent antithetical to the notion of LOs bringing standardisation. While seen from a pedagogic perspective a diversity of LOs are emphasised as being considered beneficial to student learning.

Table VI

The analysis of the LOs suggests that there is a considerable similarity in the ways LOs are described across these institutions. Similarities are particularly observed in terms of programme document structure and the use of LOs. All programme documents are formulated in accordance with "templates" developed at institutional level. The similarities are limited in how LOs provide a common ground for organising and expressing what students are expected to learn. How the LOs are presented varies considerably across the institutions.

In the Norwegian context the links between LOs on programme and module levels are weak compared to the UK case. The alignment of profession-oriented programme LOs and module, content-related, LOs is unclear. This is made more explicit in the UK institution by setting all of the diverse levels of LOs in relation to each other. In Norway these distinctions might be emphasised in the practice of teaching, yet not so clearly in programme documents.

Multiple layers of LOs

The relationships between module and programme LOs can problematise their interpretations as precise statements of what students are expected to learn. It might enrich the understanding of the challenges of learning the subject and teaching and learning the theories behind technical skills and performing them. Analysis of the

premises inherent in these structuring principles would be an interesting issue for further studies.

The occurrence of what are in effect LOs, in programme documents and to a certain extent not termed LOs in the UK institute illustrates a threat to the notion of LOs for standardisation expressed at national and transnational education policy levels. Similarly the complexity in expression of what is expected of students does not lend itself to transparency. In the Norwegian context the weak alignment between module and programme level LOs is another example of elements that may lead to less standardisation. 'Local' structural usage of LOs in different ways within programmes and universities seem to disrupt the 'foundation stone' role of the LO as a vehicle for standardisation. Instead, the analysis displays usage of LOs characterised by variability being translated to local contexts of teaching and learning. This can be interpreted as LOs being a better tool for working with learning than being a tool for standardisation.

Bullet points

In the programmes examined, statements of LOs at all levels are formulated as bullet points. This practice is seldom questioned. Formulating LOs in bullet points may be efficient for highlighting the focus of teaching and learning. Yet, LOs could be better expressed if they were written in prose. Prose would allow for detailed exposition of meaning and probably enhance transparency and cross-boundary interpretations. The downside of prose is that it takes up more space, and would be harder to link through all programme documents.

Across the Norwegian programmes and institutions, LOs are organised in the categories of *knowledge, skills and general competence* in line with the policy recommendations. The same structure is used in study programme plans and module descriptions. This means that in nurse and teacher programme plans LOs are stated in three to eight bullet points under each of the categories.

The UK programmes presents general listings of LOs and have different characteristics at programme and module levels, while at the same time being related to each other. At the programme level the organising structure of competences is labelled as Graduate Attributes in the Programme Handbook and Programme LOs in module descriptions. At module level there is a list of thematic and content-specific LOs.

There are a number of levels of LOs formulations for teacher education. For an undergraduate degree level Programme LOs articulated are also referenced to the relevant Graduate Attributes. The attributes have to be addressed in the LOs across a programme but it is not a requirement that every module addresses each of these attributes.

The analysis indicates that exploring LOs at Programme level alone is problematic. Adding to the complexity, at each level LOs are embedded in documents that include a series of other information. There is a need to explore LOs in a wider context. Our study has identified a degree of "sameness" across study programmes within and between institutions and across national borders in terms of being presented in bullet points. We have also identified similarities in how LOs seem to form a central but to a varying degree organising element in the administration of study programmes. This is also where most of the "sameness" seems to stop.

Similarities and variation across contexts

The analysis illustrates similarity and variation in how LOs are used in the diverse programme documents. One central observation is that LOs are key elements in programme documents and a unifying structure across different subject areas in the two countries. On the other hand, the ways LOs are framed in the UK and Norwegian programmes vary.

The data exemplifies that the UK system can be regarded as involving a more extensive approach for the integration of LOs in study programmes at the institutional level than can be observed in the Norwegian cases. The study illustrates how the UK cases form a complex and interconnected web of aligned LOs in documents at various levels and in relation to various actors. In the Norwegian case the alignment of LOs in documents seem to be strong at national level, and reflected in the study programme documents. To what extent the alignment reaches the arenas for teaching and learning is a question of local teaching and assessment practices. The system of validation and checks and balances concerning the uses of LOs in the Norwegian system in contrast to the UK case seem to begin and end with the guidelines and regulations provided at government level.

Differences across the boundaries is an aspect related to the variations in national governance of the professions. In Norway in teacher education, to a greater extent than in nursing, the National Curriculum specifies content areas and defines LOs. To a large extent these are copied in the study programme plans . While in the UK case the national documents are the professional standards, defining standards for professional practice forming the basis for placement of LOs in the programmes.

Frames of reference in higher education learning outcomes

The analysis illustrates the various elements that seem to influence the development of LOs (see Figure 1). They are embedded in diverse contexts, expressing various intentions and conceptualised differently across diverse frames of reference. Starting at the top of the vertical line of the four-part figure, the assessment of students' achievements underscores the function of assessment of LOs through the practical application of both theoretical and practical knowledge before entering into the profession. LOs are seen as a tool to make explicit what students can do at the end of a programme referring to students' achievements, but also giving direction about students' learning activities and by welcoming students as learners and future professionals in the introduction of the programme guides. Assessment is related to the other end of the vertical dimension of LOs describing the course content and the process of education. LOs are integrated with the other elements of curriculum such as purpose, aim, content, syllabus and teaching and learning activities. LOs have a double functioning of defining the end result as well as being a frame of reference for teachers' and students' work towards the end of the study. They hold a double message to students, by clarifying what is expected of them and what they need to do to reach expectations.

The horizontal line illustrates the contexts in which LOs are developed; stakeholders, interests and communicative settings. On the one side is LOs as a policy initiative with ambitions to govern higher education by promoting a unifying approach to education . A key concern is how higher education contributes to social welfare and economic growth.

On the other side is higher education institutions, representing an academic tradition with a focus on knowledge seeking and searching for new insights. What further complicates the issue is that in the academic context there is a range of knowledge structures, epistemic cultures and professional histories treating LOs in varied ways. Professional education programmes, being constructed by a mix of disciplinary fields, have multiple epistemic cultures within one programme that constitutes the core of a professional knowledge base.

It is to be expected that the main policy perspective is what students are able to do at the end of education. Likewise, that in academic institutions the focus is on knowledge that is needed for students to understand a professional field and professional practice, and thus be able to act in accordance with professional standards. In the UK institution the disparities between the academic and professional interests are expressed by the distinction between Professional Standards, programme LOs and content-related LOs. In the Norwegian context these perspectives and interests are blurred. The diagonal line between the field of professional practice and the field of academic practice illustrate this tension in perspectives on learning outcomes.

Figure 1

In the EU rhetoric (Kennedy et al. 2007) LOs are seen as result of learning, while in the module descriptions they are introduced as what students should learn. While LOs are introduced as a policy initiative for improving the efficiency of European higher education, the formulation of LOs is handed over to academics who re-negotiate their meaning. They are included in and transformed by academic standards set by the university –in how they are expressed or in how they are applied in educational practice. This implies that learning outcomes are flexible, and serve multiple purposes. Whether they can be said to be precise depends on the interpretive context and the interpreter.

Figure 1 illustrates dilemmas that are inherent in the use of learning outcomes in both UK and Norway. When enacted upon in the academic context learning outcomes are re-negotiated to concur with the epistemic culture of the discipline.

In this study we have observed how the fields of professional practice influence the content of programme differently. In the UK institution the professional field sets the standards for the student learning, the educational institution sets the LOs for the programme components building up to these professional standards. In the UK institution the distinction between professional standards (taking the form of LOs in placement), programme learning outcomes (Graduate Attributes) and module LOs and are more distinct than in Norwegian programmes. In Norway, LO tend to be more centralised, and the professional sectors are less involved in formulating professional standards.

Muller and Young (2014) argue that outcomes-based education challenges the fundamental basis for learning by putting 'being able to do' in the forefront and 'eclipse the conceptual content' (2014, p. 137). Our study implies that to attribute too much

emphasis on LOs framed in bullet points in isolation from the documents, attributes, standards and supplemental material informing the activities may lead to oversimplifications of the functionalities and complexity of LOs in professional study programmes. These variations seem to be overlooked in the LO oriented rhetoric of education policy. LOs at study programme level, in module plans and study guides seem to require a broader remit for consideration of the factors that have an impact on the teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the level of central control is high in both countries when related to professional education within the public services. How this is played out varies, in UK recent policy developments indicate a likeliness of policy changes in LOs on a frequent basis, which might reduce stability for students and academics. For the present, this development contrasts the situation in Norway where no signals of upcoming changes can be seen. At national level and at the study programme level there are differences in the national governing of LOs in professional study programmes and also variation in what the governing is about. Professional fields of practice are involved in setting standards of LOs in nursing and teaching programmes, although to a varying degree in the two countries.

A central issue pursued in this study was how notions of standardisation, (Adam 2004) and sameness (Allais 2012) are reflected in LOs as described in documents of professional study programmes. Are LOs 'foundation stones' in curriculum development? This study has shown that a wide range of interconnected documents framing LOs in professional studies open up for varied approaches which weakens the establishment of sameness across institutions and nations.

This study highlights how for LOs to be understood, they must be seen in relation to other LOs – and diverse levels of LOs. Institutions' LOs are key 'building blocks' in the construction of the programme, rather than 'foundation stones'. LOs are used to communicate to students and among teachers what is valued, what students are expected to learn, how they are expected to study and how they will be assessed. They also communicate externally what students are expected to be able to do at the end of the programme. Whether the approaches will lead to clarity and precision seem to depend on the practices, which would be an interesting next step in the study of LOs in professional study programmes. A central implication of this study is how the looseness of LOs seem to be their primary advantage as regulative mechanism for both policy, teaching, learning and assessment. A stated LO, at bullet point level, is precise enough to warrant an acceptable level of transparency and loose enough to allow diverse and conflicting interpretations. The primary is essential in a policy context and the latter is essential in an academic education context. This also implies that policy makers at a national level should be highly cautious when suggesting that LOs are a device to enable transnational, or even transinstitutional, understanding of programmes' learning intentions.

The 'regional' character of professional education (Muller and Young 2014) establishes a complex mix of complementary fields upholding the professional knowledge base. It makes the ground for tensions between disciplinary perspectives and the academic and the professional perspectives espoused by diverse stakeholders. Finally, these diverse stakeholders and perspectives constitute multiple communicative settings whereby the

exchange of interests and approaches takes place. An interesting finding in this project has been not just the differences across the Norwegian and UK institutions, but the ways of establishing relationships in curriculum development at national and institutional levels.

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