## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**WILEY**

# HELOs and student centred learning – where's the link?

AQ2

**Rachel Sweetman**

Department of Education, University of Oslo, Norway

**Correspondence**
Rachel Sweetman, Department of Education, University of Oslo, Postboks 1092 Blindern 0317 Oslo, Norway.
Email: rachel.sweetman@iped.uio.no

**Abstract**

Learning outcomes are presented as a tool that can enhance teaching and learning in higher education, in particular by fostering student-centred learning. However, the ways in which this change can and should take place and the specific kinds of enhancement involved are often unclear. This article analyses common claims about the advantages of learning outcomes for teaching and learning and their relationship to student-centred learning. The potential links between these concepts are investigated, based on interviews with teachers and students from a range of degree programmes at Norwegian and English universities. The interviews with 29 teachers and students suggest that learning outcome approaches are influencing course planning and some aspects of teaching practice, supporting more transparency and clear communication with students and offering a way to address particularly weak or traditional teaching. However, there is limited evidence that learning outcome approaches promote student-centred learning, and the analysis identifies several tensions between the challenges student-centred learning ideals pose to traditional teaching practices, in terms of transferring power and choice to students, and perceived pressures to specify and assess learning outcomes. It also suggests that teachers' and students' beliefs about the conditions and practices that lead to the most satisfying and successful elements of learning in degree courses are unlikely to be addressed through either learning-outcome or student-centred reforms.

## 1 | THE EVOLVING PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES

Higher education learning outcomes (HELOS) are argued to mark a fundamental paradigm shift in policy and practice from the traditional focus on teaching to a focus on student learning (Adam, 2004; Otter, 1992). HELOS are concerned with the learner's achievements rather than the teacher's intentions (Adam, 2008). This shift to student-centred learning has become central to the European higher education reform agenda, with both learning outcomes (LOs) and student-centredness gaining prominence over recent Bologna Communiqués (Sin, 2014): 'We reiterate our commitment to promote student-centred learning in higher education, characterized by innovative methods of teaching that

involve students as active participants in their own learning' (Bucharest Bologna Communiqué, see Bologna Secretariat, 2012).

As part of the European higher education agenda, HELOs have developed from a format for expressing qualifications more clearly and consistently, to a tool that supports curricular reform, to an intervention expected to drive progress towards student-centred learning (Adam, 2008; Sin, 2014). According to Lassnigg (2012, p. 300), they 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. They are meant to be reform instruments that can change the relationships between actors, the system architecture and pedagogical practice'. However, the mechanisms whereby HELO approaches relate to student-centred learning are implicit or vague. There is little empirical research into if and how students use learning outcomes, initial studies suggesting that their weak understanding of HELOs leads to varied and limited impacts on study habits (Brooks, Dobbins, Scott, Rawlinson, & Norman, 2014). The HELO concept and student-centredness are defined in various ways, with considerable disagreement about their nature and likely impact. By exploring how students and teachers perceive the influence of HELOs on degree course planning and practice and on learning experiences, this article sheds light on the potential relationship between HELOs and student-centred learning.

## 2 | HOW MIGHT HELOs BE USED TO ENHANCE LEARNING IN DEGREE PROGRAMMES?

The proposed benefits of HELOs include international and national qualification alignment or harmonisation, greater transparency about educational impact, enhanced quality assurance possibilities, and improved relevance of education for working life and graduate employability (Adam, 2008; ENQUA, 2010). Claims regarding their influence on teaching and learning typically relate to increased *transparency*; greater *alignment* between course aims, activities and assessment processes; and fostering *student-centred* environments and practices. Exactly what these enhancements mean in practice and how HELOs encourage them are often vague. Before looking at student-centred learning in greater depth, the issues of transparency and alignment learning are reviewed, as these are often presented as supportive of or overlapping with student-centredness.

HELOs are frequently argued to offer a response to broad changes in higher education, such as massification, higher expectations from students as paying customers and demands for more evidence of the impacts and benefits of higher education that demand greater transparency (Adam, 2008; ENQA, 2010). A rapid increase in student diversity also means that teaching approaches developed for small groups of able, highly-motivated students cannot meet the needs of larger, more mixed-ability cohorts (Biggs, 1999). HELOs provide a language and format that make what higher education 'does' clearer to stakeholders, particularly students, employers and policy makers (Ewell, 2007). Similarly, ongoing efforts to devise accessible, detailed and robust quality metrics for higher education often invoke HELOs as a more direct way to assess what it does (Stensaker & Sweetman, 2014). However, how HELOs enhance learning is rendered complicated by the lack of agreement about what they are or involve. Criticised as lacking any clear theoretical basis, drawing on divergent pedagogic theories, there is disagreement about how the concept should be understood and measured (Allan, 1996; Prøitz, 2010; Smyth & Dow, 1998). Prøitz (2010) describes how HELOs may be implemented via precise descriptions of expected outcomes, supporting more explicit instructional design and curriculum planning or with a more open sense of LOs as whatever results from education, including unintended changes. While links to specific pedagogies are vague, LOs have strong roots in 'rational curriculum design' (Allan, 1996) and are frequently associated with constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999, 2011; Kennedy, 2006). Here, curricula are designed using learning outcomes to ensure consistency across teaching activities, learning activities and assessment tasks (Kennedy, 2006). Constructive alignment is presented as an alternative to traditional teaching in higher education (Biggs, 2011) and a form of student-centred learning based on evidence about student motivation and learning (Hodge, 2010). It proposes approaches to make teaching and learning processes more explicit, with more active students adopting deeper approaches. Constructive alignment challenges the ambiguities said to characterise traditional teaching, where expectations and aims are poorly communicated.

Critical perspectives on HELOs suggest that they can encourage over-rationalised, linear conceptions of the learn- 87
ing process and fail to engage with more dynamic, unpredictable and relational aspects of learning (Biesta, 2009; Hus- 88
sey & Smith, 2008; Smyth & Dow, 1998). Ramsden (1992) cautions that the influence of learning outcomes on 89
pedagogical practices and enhancement depends on how they are applied, as particularly strict and inflexible 90
approaches may fragment and restrict the overall learning process. Entwistle (2009) acknowledges the risk that 'tar- 91
geted understanding' approaches, such as HELOs, may encourage students to take a 'tick box' approach to learning. 92

## 3 | HOW MIGHT HELOs RELATE TO STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING? 93

Adam (2008, p. 13) argues that student-centred learning *necessitates* the use of learning outcomes as the only logical 94
approach, as it produces an automatic focus on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments. 95
Others argue that outcome approaches mark a shift away from traditional teacher-centred practice (Prøitz, 2010), signal 96
moves to student-centred learning (Maher, 2004), or conflate them as the same thing (Kennedy, 2007). Such claims are 97
hard to assess empirically. Student-centred learning is criticised for a lack of detail about what it is or how it works 98
(Farrington, 1991; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Tangney, 2014). The term is often used casually, left undefined, or con- 99
flated with ideas such as flexible learning, experiential learning, self-directed learning (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005) and 100
more particularly active learning (Farrington, 1991). Contemporary European reforms seem to use student-centredness to 101
signal a general focus on more active learning and less traditional teaching. This lack of clarity reflects the long-standing 102
and varied roots of student- or learner-centred ideas. A key starting point for these ideas is Dewey's experiential learning. 103
'Student-centred learning' is widely attributed to Carl Rogers' perspectives on psychology, flourishing and education 104
(Brandes & Ginnis, 1996; O'Neil & McMahon, 2005). These perspectives challenged the traditional, authoritative role of 105
educators, the passivity of learners, and views of education as the 'transmission' of expert-defined knowledge. The term 106
student-centred has also been used to describe teachers' conceptions of learning, as a contrast to traditional teacher- and 107
content-focused understandings (Kember, 1997; 2009). The related term of 'learner-centredness', which is widely used in 108
education policy, signals an intention to move away from traditional practices, and features prominently in education 109
reforms, particularly donor-sponsored projects in developing countries (Schweisfurth, 2011). These psychological, peda- 110
gogical and policy perspectives encourage very varied ideas about what student-centred learning is for or can do. 111

Student-centred learning turns variously around student's choice in their education; the student doing more than the 112
lecturer (active versus passive learning); or a shift in the power relationship between the student and the teacher (O'Neil & 113
McMahon, 2005, p. 29). It refers to 'a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in 114
diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing 115
and implementing learning outcomes' (Knowles, 1975 cited in Farrington, 1991, p.16). Student responsibility and activity in 116
learning are emphasised in contrast to 'teacher control and coverage of academic content in conventional, didactic teaching' 117
(Cannon & Newble, 2000, p.16, cited in Lea et al., 2003). These definitions are not consistent in their emphasis. The former 118
stresses that students must be granted considerable agency and influence at all stages of the learning process, including 119
establishing intended outcomes; the latter stresses a shift in responsibility and agency from teachers to students and moves 120
away from traditional didactic methods. However, these competing definitions all anticipate significant shifts in practice and 121
in the role of teachers and students, expressed in metaphors for how the role of teacher is changed from 'lecturer' or 'trans- 122
mitter' to 'facilitator' or 'guide' (Wright, 2011). Exactly how far the lecturer should hand over influence remains unclear. 123

Some versions of student-centred learning seem much thinner, implying changes in teaching activity or formats, 124
whilst neglecting more substantive changes associated with the idea. Using student-centredness synonymously with 125
active learning may not only neglect but undercut more comprehensive definitions which include choice in learning 126
and shifts of power in the teacher–student relationship (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005). Student-centredness may require 127
ongoing negotiation between the teacher and student in all key learning decisions, specifically 'What is to be learnt, 128
how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgements 129
are made and by whom these judgements are made' (Gibbs, 1995, p.1, cited in O'Neil & McMahon, 2005, p. 28). Tang- 130
ney (2014) highlights how student choice and power are often overlooked in discussions of student-centred learning, 131

suggesting that humanist ideas of holistic approaches, empowerment and emancipation are often absent in more 132 'pedagogic' discussions of the phenomena. 133

There is a general assumption that, despite variations in the nature and extent of shifts in roles and power 134 between teachers and students, such change is positive. Yet, an emphasis on students' perspectives and preferences 135 can de-legitimise the role of teachers, contribute to an 'absence of the academic' (Sabri, 2011) or uncritical focus on 136 student satisfaction which homogenises students and learning. It can been seen as part of what Biesta (2009) refers to 137 as 'learnification', where a focus on doing whatever is 'effective' conceals normative questions about the purposes of 138 education and who benefits from it. Moreover, the common assumption that any gain in student responsibility or 139 agency must come at the expense of teachers does not help. Student-centredness and teacher-centredness can be 140 mutually supportive, contributing to high-quality learning (Elen et al., 2007). 141

Finally, many authors suggest that there is more rhetoric than reality around this topic: the popularity and use of 142 the term student-centred in institutions or among teachers may not signal changes in practices (Farrington, 1991; 143 Tangney, 2014; Greener, 2015). 'Student-centred' has become a 'required criterion for academic credibility' but has 144 not 'penetrated beyond the periphery of practice' (Greener, 2015, p. 1). Teachers who claim to be doing student- 145 centred teaching have divergent views about what this involves (Farrington, 1991; Tangney, 2014). 146

## 4 | IDENTIFYING KEY FEATURES OF STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING 147

These various versions of student-centredness will be used in this article to explore if, how, and in what ways HELOs 148 have an affinity or relationship with student-centred learning in general, or in selected aspects of it. The discussion above 149 suggests that most descriptions of student-centred learning invoke some or all of the key features summarised in Table I, 150 and, together, provide a way of considering forms of student-centred learning which vary in scope and intensity. 151

**TABLE I** Mapping key features of student-centred learning

| Key issues | | Defining features of student-centred learning |
|---|---|---|
| What is meant by learning? | Type of learning | Deep learning and understanding (Lea et al., 2003), powerful or transformational learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995) active engagement with knowledge (Kember, 2009; Ramsden, 1992). |
| | Nature of learning | Knowledge not 'out there' but constructed by/within students, not 'transmitted' by teacher (Barr & Tagg, 1995); |
| Practice/activities involved? | Approach to learning | Developing an environment supportive of learning with a focus on the learner's experience; offering variety of teaching and student activities (Kember, 2009); emphasising creativity and discovery (Ewell, 2007), active rather than passive learning (Lea et al., 2003) and developing holistic not fragmented/atomistic understanding (Barr & Tagg, 1995). |
| What roles are expected? | Role of the student | Students as active participants not receivers (Tangney, 2014) with increased responsibility and autonomy (Lea et al., 2003; Hodge, 2010); some role in shaping learning goals and approaches to be used; the ability to make use of variety strategies to meet varied needs (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Wright, 2011). |
| | Role of the teacher | Designer of environment that supports learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and facilitator of learning working with students as catalysts/advisers (Wright, 2011); empower students and develop the individual student (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Wright, 2011). |
| Are there implications for power and choice? | Shifts in power | Shift away from teaching to learning encourages power to move from the teacher to the student (Barr & Tagg, 1995); empowerment and emancipation (Tangney, 2014). |
| | Choice/agency | Choice of what to study and how to study it (Gibbs, 1995; Burnard, 1999, both as cited in O'Neil & McMahon). |

T1

As Lea et al. (2003) note, the divergence in views about student-centred learning is not just a matter of pedagogical approaches, but of underlying epistemology, and the likely implications of changes. Table I is built around four questions about: the nature of knowledge or learning implied; types of activity and practices; shifts in the role of teachers and students; and, the issues of power and choice in learning practices. These provide a starting point for analyses of how teachers' and students' views and experiences reflect a varied sense of what student-centred learning is about, would look like in practice, and the results it is directed at. This accepts that what counts as 'doing' student-centred learning could vary considerably. Encouraging students to think about their responsibility for learning and introducing occasional 'active' tasks alongside lectures could reflect a relatively thin notion. More extensive or radical versions of student-centredness could involve changes where teachers cede, or at least share, control of significant aspects of the whole learning process.

## 5 | METHODS AND DATA

The link between HELOs and enhanced student-centred learning is analysed according to a set of interviews, from eight bachelor's degree-programme cases at Norwegian and English universities (see Caspersen, Frølich and Muller in this issue). The interviews (29 teaching staff and students) investigated experiences related to the use and impacts of HELOs on teaching and learning. They were largely one-to-one, with a few respondents in small group interviews. The staff spanned relatively new teachers and senior staff with responsibility for programme planning or additional teaching responsibility (e.g. in departmental teaching and learning committees), but all were active teachers. All cases are from traditional, highly-ranked universities (two in each country) with similar degree programmes across the national cases. The degree cases comprised four STEM programmes (two professionally oriented two pure) and four humanities programmes. The interviews were recorded via live notes or transcriptions from audio files. Key questions that guided the interviews and analysis included: What are students' and teachers' impressions or understanding of HELO approaches?; How are HELOs established/defined for the course/degree?; Are HELOs perceived as influencing changes in teaching or learning or assessment practices?; What do teachers/students see as key factors determining good quality teaching/learning?; How do HELO approaches fit with their particular subject area/discipline?; What kinds of learning and knowledge fit well/less well with HELO approaches?; Are there any challenges associated with introducing or using LOs? As the analysis developed, further issues and codes emerged, notably: do LO approaches influence the role or approach of teachers or students and if so, how? And, how do changes in HELOs relate to issues of power and decision making?

The data were gathered with comparative aims in mind. However, this analysis is not focused on disciplinary or national variations (although these are mentioned where particularly relevant) but on how HELO approaches are perceived to shape teaching and learning practices and experiences. It is also important to note certain limitations to these data, which means that they may not offer a thorough cross-section of perspectives found in the two countries' higher education systems overall. The universities were all research-intensive and highly-ranked, and the respondents involved more senior teachers or heads of department and particularly engaged students (based on their volunteering to be interviewed in England, or acting as class representatives in Norway). The data provide a 'snapshot' of practices and perceived changes at one point in time; any claims about changes in practice linked to the introduction or use of HELOs were based on the impressions of staff and students. Despite these limitations, the data provide insights from the perspective of those tasked with putting HELOs into practice in degree-level teaching and those experiencing learning in these settings.

## 6 | RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results are presented in terms of three broad topics, aligned with the areas in Table I.

### 6.1 | Changes in teaching and learning practices associated with HELOs

A key contrast that is important to note from the outset is that the term 'learning outcomes' is perceived differently in Norway and England. English teachers tended to see learning outcomes as an administrative feature (a form to be filled out) or re-labelling of prior terms such as 'aims and objectives'. In Norway, they were familiar as part of a wider reform

process of drafting and updating course descriptions in response to new quality assurance rules. In both countries, HELOs encouraged some changes in teaching that were generally welcome. The process of developing and updating LOs could spark reflection, dialogue and collaboration between colleagues, potentially resulting in greater coherence and teachers feeling more able to communicate what a specific degree offers their students. In several Norwegian cases, the process of establishing LOs was felt to have supported more team-work in teaching.

> The department went on an away day for a 'theme-building' sessions and it worked very well. 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. That feeling has probably not been very strong before (NO4STEM lecturer).

HELOs were felt to provide a way to challenge traditional teaching or support less experienced teachers. This was more prominent in Norwegian cases, where teaching was, until recently, described as the private business of individual lecturers. In English cases, HELOs were more likely to be described as helpful for newer or less confident teachers, providing a 'recipe' or guideline for planning and describing modules. They could therefore seem irrelevant to more experienced teachers.

> You might have people [teachers] who are less secure and don't know where they are going. So using it [learning outcomes] is a positive thing, rather than forcing it on people saying you have to do it, you can use it more as a yardstick for you to use yourself.
>
> (EN1HuLecturer)

The general feeling suggests that HELOs provide a fairly concrete, easy way to make the aims and intentions of courses transparent for students and, by extension, a way of communicating the programme's content and expectations more explicitly. Such transparency was contrasted with some traditional approaches that lacked signposting or structure to orientate students. Developing and updating LOs also provided an opportunity for some teachers to review how course aims, content and activities and assessments worked together, essentially offering a renewed focus on alignment. In England, it was generally expected that course LOs be reflected in assessment. In the Norwegian cases, this was expected to emerge as a requirement, but was more likely to be in progress than in place. Both countries focused more on the need to align LOs with assessments than with learning activities or processes. It was unclear if clarity about LOs translated into shifts in teaching style, or changes in activities beyond final assessments. Shifts in teaching approach, such as encouraging students to use different learning strategies, or engage in more int learning strawere not discussed as resulting from LOs. These issues did emerge, but in more complex ways through discussions about the challenge of capturing the range of knowledge and abilities involved in a degree in LO formats. In several programmes (typically STEM/professionally-oriented courses), some felt that LOs helped to clarify transferable skills (e.g. teamwork or presentations) so that they could become more prominent in assessments and be built into ongoing activities in preparation for final projects or assessed tasks. Such end-of-year projects, group tasks or portfolio-type assessments were seen as a good way of assessing 'ssessing sments alongside content knowledge.

> The content gives the technical knowledge, and we need that for our subject, but you've also got skills which are technical skills. The way you assess gives you all the other skills – it could be writing it could be communication, it could be interpretation, that sort of thing. So the assignment gives you a lot of the more general transferable skills.
>
> (EN2STEMLecturer)

Teachers and students underlined that anticipated assessment strongly determined how learning took place and how students studied. Students described studying towards their assessment and teachers raised concerns that it was hard to get formative activities to work, as students were often reluctant to spend time on them. Some students said they referred to course LO descriptions to clarify what was expected of them, though most relied heavily on prior examples of assessments or exams.

Greater clarity and transparency brought by LOs were perceived as carrying both risks and benefits. Some teachers felt very specifically that LOs could be reductive or constraining, with key content and ideas simplified to fit the language of outcomes. A recurring sense among teachers and students, particularly in England, was that, whilst clarity was valuable, it was only possible and desirable to explain some of what was to be learned. At some point, students must make sense of things for themselves. There was a sense that efforts to specify how students were expected to perform could go too far, to become 'spoon feeding' or encourage a 'tick box' approach to the course.

> We can do all that work (preparing them) and they can still write a bad essay, because they can't synthesise all the material and put it all together. That still has to be their process. It isn't something you can teach in an hour or tell someone how to do. (EN1HuLecturer)

Many teachers felt that, while LOs could help to communicate *some* aspects of degree-level learning, students still had to engage with a learning process which was personal and contained areas of uncertainty and confusion, where they were not clear about what they were learning until they had learnt it. Students also acknowledged that, whilst clear information about courses content, organisation, and what they should be able to do was useful, there were limits to what it could convey.

> People always ask if they can get hold of earlier exams and see how they look... I think a lot of people found that we didn't know how you should read the course literature. Should we take notes while we read? It took quite a long time to work that sort of thing out. (NO4HuStudent)

There were also questions about the extent to which LOs could capture differing levels of performance. LOs were generally seen as specifying a minimum or general level of achievement, but were felt to be a poor way to communicate what it would mean to excel, as that often involved going beyond basic criteria and doing something creative or unexpected. Similarly, tensions were expressed about using LOs in courses where the aim was to encourage students to realise that there were many ways to address an issue or solve a problem. These concerns about the limitations of LOs were less prominent in Norway and in more vocationally-oriented programmes. One possible reason could be that the boundaries of 'core outcomes' were harder to define in these subjects.

> When the first drafts of learning outcomes were circulated the [natural sciences and maths courses] had three points. Languages had a long list. While the first is clear end targeted - those programmes culminate in a specific [employment] area... It's not so obvious what you should have in a more general subject like a language. (NO1HuLeader)

Limitations of LOs, and the way they might fail to capture aspects of learning, suggest an ambiguous relationship between LOs, transparency, and the learning experienced in degrees. The range of responses suggests that LOs can be an effective way to map key landmarks, or more granular points to be learned from a course, but both the individual process of learning, and certain important types of learning, are difficult to express in an outcomes format. Implementing learning outcomes in the name of transparency therefore carries risks of stripping away meaning, or of encouraging students to perform in a more instrumental way.

> I think a lot of academics [ ] feel that this is an illusory clarity; it's sort of, trying to pretend that the terrain of
> learning and teaching is simpler and easier to explain than it actually is. The result of that are these sorts of
> frustrations: students want more and more clarity and academics are saying, 'well, you know, more clarity than
> this isn't possible. I have already written five pages of explanation about how to do your assessment. That is
> enough. It's not possible to specify in greater detail than that'... you reach a point where students are not mak-
> ing judgments that they need to make. (EN2HuLecturer)

## 6.2 | Changes in student and teacher roles associated with HELOs

Neither students' nor teachers' comments revealed a sense of their roles shifting considerably with a LO approach.
Teachers did not seem to feel that LOs helped them to transfer responsibility for learning to their students. Although
they expressed interest in encouraging students to work independently and be active, teachers largely relied on the
pressure of assessments, and occasionally on mandatory tasks or group work to 'make' students work outside lectures.
Teachers felt pressure to increase student satisfaction (expressed via surveys) and were concerned with improving the
quality of courses and teaching. These aspirations were felt to be frustrated not by their preference for 'traditional'
teaching, but by a context typified by increasing class sizes, more varied student bodies with mixed abilities, and a
diversity of students' interests and future plans.

> The way we teach has gone through enormous changes with increases in our cohort sizes, and I think we're
> currently going through a period of self-reflection, and whilst we focus an awful lot on the student experience,
> I think there's actually also been a disconnect and a reduction in staff morale from their perspective. Because if
> the class sizes start getting large, how do the staff connect with the student is challenging. Communication is
> two way, engagement is two way. (EN2STEMLecturer)

The enhanced clarity that LOs could offer was felt to help students to orient themselves, and to some extent offered
them a clearer sense of what was expected of them. However, teachers' comments about the process of using LOs
seemed to suggest this increased clarity did not lead to students taking on more responsibility and agency. Teachers
still felt that they would be seen as responsible for the success or failure of students on a course, often believing stu-
dents needed to be coerced or forced to engage with learning, rather than simply given the opportunity and resources.
This reflects a traditional sense of the teachers' role in defining and channelling learning activity. Students and teachers
recognised that, whilst programmes gave opportunities for learning, it was ultimately down to the students how hard
they worked and how they did.

> Students are surprisingly conservative - sitting there doing nothing at all, they only listen, they are passive
> recipients of information. [ ] Students would learn more if they did more. (NO4STEMLecturer)

Some teachers and students raised concerns, particularly in England, that LOs encouraged a consumer orientation. The
idea that students can expect to 'receive' certain outcomes from a course, which can be specified in advance, could be
perceived as a form of quasi-contract, encouraging a passive role.

Students described their role as learners changing during their courses, and experiencing some learning as more
active and deep. However, this was not related to LOs or practices associated with them, but to engagement with spe-
cific bodies of knowledge that interested them, where they talked about feeling they were learning in a different way,
moving into a different role or changing in themselves. Students referred to excellent lectures or relationships with
specific teachers providing feedback on traditional assessment tasks.

Teachers and students valued elements of more traditional, teacher-centred education, notably high-quality lec-
tures and essay assignments including detailed, personal feedback. Approaches seen as more student-centred, such as
smaller group seminars, summative tasks and opportunities for ongoing feedback and guidance were also mentioned

as good ways to engage students and develop a more collaborative relationship between teachers and students. These 324
were often felt to be limited by resource constraints, not teacher attitudes or a lack of LO approaches supporting 325
them. Teachers wanting to make use of more varied and active approaches in teaching repeatedly suggested that this 326
was constrained by resources (class sizes and formats, teacher time for preparation and contact). They also suggested 327
that students' unwillingness to engage with tasks that did not count towards a final grade made more activities or sum- 328
mative tasks a challenge. 329

> When I talk to small groups you can see lights coming on 'oh, that's why we're doing that'. I said earlier that I 330
> think marks are a barrier to learning, and I still think they are, but in some cases because students will focus on 331
> what mark they will get rather than what they are learning and the skills they were developing. (EN1STEMLec- 332
> turer/leader) 333

334

## 6.3 | HELOS and issues of power and choice 335

The design of degree programmes and balancing compulsory and optional modules were related to teachers' roles and 336
issues of power and choice. Although having some choice about courses was important to students, it seemed that nei- 337
ther they nor teachers felt that students should have more power in determining the overall shape and content of 338
degrees. Students and teachers suggested that a key part of the teacher's role was to understand the 'big picture' of a 339
discipline or professional area and guide students into it. Teachers underlined this selection and prioritisation of con- 340
tent and knowledge as central to their role. 341

Students wanted the security of knowing that their degree included 'core' knowledge for their field, but were also 342
enthusiastic about tailoring their degree to their interests and abilities. Teachers thought that degrees (particularly in 343
the humanities) provided many opportunities to follow various 'tracks' within programmes, based on student preferen- 344
ces. Whilst popular, this was noted as in tension with aspirations for LOs to support coherence and standardisation: 345
modular degrees and varied discipline sub-fields made identifying 'core' or common LOs at the degree level more diffi- 346
cult. Students were also aware that their selection of courses and the range of skills or knowledge they were develop- 347
ing could vary a great deal. They did not expect to end up with the same LOs as their peers in many cases, and were 348
aware of pursuing diverse ambitions. This was more common in humanities/languages. 349

> You end up doing something completely different than the person sat next to you. Especially in things like the 350
> essay – people are doing things on all kinds of different examples and materials. (EN2HuStudent) 351

352

Explicit discussions of power were not a feature in the interviews. To the extent that any sense of power struggles 353
emerged, it related to the issues of students as consumers, a 'student rights' orientation to learning, or challenging 354
results from assessments. There was concern that by defining what students could 'expect', or should 'receive', from a 355
degree, they may see themselves more as consumers, or blame the teacher or institution if they were unsatisfied with 356
their degree results. Some felt power was shifting away from teachers *and* students towards managers or heads of 357
departments. Changes related to LOs that were generally received positively, such as making the teachers' and depart- 358
ment's aims more explicit, did inevitably seem to reduce the scope for student steering of the educational journey. 359

## 7 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS 360

The analysis suggests that learning outcomes are influencing aspects of course planning and teaching practice, but the 361
extent and nature of this influence varies, and the implications of these changes are neither seen as entirely positive or 362
clearly supportive of most features of student-centred learning. The assumption that more learning outcome-based or 363
student-centred approaches are priorities for teachers and students is also questioned. 364

There are signs that LOs encourage a focus on transparency and alignment, safeguarding against weaker teaching practices or challenge cases of particularly traditional teaching. Elements of constructive alignment were suggested in the interviews in aspirations to link LOs and assessment more explicitly; however there were no signs of significant influence on overall alignment across intended outcomes, teaching approaches or activities, and assessment. There was also little sign of LOs shaping or shifting teachers' approaches or day-to-day activities, or encouraging more activity and responsibility among students. The exception here is the few cases that integrate subject-specific and generic LOs through final assessments involving project or group tasks. There is some scope to suggest that by re-working courses in the language of outcomes, teachers have new opportunities to reflect on how they communicate content and expectations to students more clearly and collaborate to develop students' learning over a whole degree. Overall, however, the results offer little support for claims that HELOs are sparking a paradigm shift in teaching and learning, or Adam's (2008) argument that learning outcomes necessarily support more learner-focused and effective environments.

One possible explanation for this limited influence is the lack of theoretical and practical clarity around both HELOs and student-centred learning; this may mean neither is put into practice with the consistency required for teachers or students to recognise a shift. Individual courses and actors may put them to work in ad-hoc ways which undermine any systematic changes. Previous studies have suggested that students only experienced student-centred learning reforms as a significant change when there was a substantial, collective shift in practices and acceptance of common philosophies about learning and the aims of education (Kember, 2009; Elen et al., 2007).

It is also significant that several of the key features related to more substantive or wide-ranging notions of student-centred learning, such as engagement with knowledge, shifts in roles and power and student input about what is learnt, how, and how success is determined are not prominent. Whilst teachers express an interest in helping their students to engage with their subject and be more active and independent, it does not seem that LO approaches are helping them achieve this. Whilst clarity about what is expected of students is generally seen as helpful, the results also show concerns from students and teachers about the potential of too much specification and pre-definition of learning in higher education, with potential constraints on flexibility and variety, or fostering more instrumental learning. Hence, an LO approach could even undermine features of student-centred learning where they stress students' individuality and agency in developing knowledge.

Whilst an opposition between teacher- and student-centred approaches is often implied, the results suggest that neither extreme may be particularly achievable or desirable in practice. Most cases reflect a balance being sought between more traditional 'delivery' of teaching through lectures, and varied assessment approaches which draw upon broader skills and content knowledge. The experiences teachers and students raised as particularly successful or engaging include aspects of teacher- and student-centred features. Here, and in previous studies (Elen, Clarebout, Léonard, & Lowyck, 2007), students express a preference for a combination of both forms: clear guidance, feedback and the expertise of a teacher telling them what to learn and how, with room left for personalisation and creativity. Ellen et al. (2007) refer to this as a 'safe and challenging learning environment', suggesting teacher- and student-centred approaches should not be presented or applied as independent and competing, but related and complementary features of high-quality higher education.

HELOs' role in enhanced transparency and some minimal alignment of programmes may be important in guarding against poor quality courses, but enhancing learning, or supporting the most satisfying and transformational aspects of learning seem to involve issues which neither HELOS, nor 'thinner' versions of student-centred learning connect with in practice: engagement with specific bodies of knowledge, relationships between students and teachers, and individual transformation. The clarity offered by LOs as an unadulterated positive, may have more mixed implications for how learning is understood and approached by teachers and students. Expectations that all aspects of degree programmes should be made as explicit as possible simply do not fit with high-level learning: individual judgement, variety and creativity and independent knowledge development may be undermined. Aspects of learning that are harder to express and assess may be neglected. Features of student-centred learning transferring choice and power about what is to be learned and how seem to be an uncomfortable fit where LOs lead to increasingly fixed and specified course plans and success criteria.

It seems possible that a focus on HELOs and student-centred learning in reform agendas may divert attention from more basic issues that teachers and students perceive as more important to quality learning. One reason suggested for student-centred approaches to tend to be less evident in practice than in rhetoric and intentions is that student-centred learning, in most incarnations, is likely to require more resources and demand more input and planning from teachers than traditional methods (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003). The challenges of larger classes and limited teaching resources may make significant changes in teaching and learning activities, increases in contact time, or the development of more supportive, challenging learning environments, hard to achieve.

The implications are that it seems unlikely that HELOs will trigger profound shifts or enhancements in teaching quality and learning in isolation. The challenge of meeting teachers' and students' interest in more satisfying and profound learning experiences, or developing more substantive student-centred learning, seem to be limited by students and teachers wanting a balance between teacher- and student-centred practices and by environments of growing class sizes and resource constraints.

Finally, if HELOs continue to be used more explicitly in planning and aligning courses, it is important to consider the potential for them to have detrimental as well as positive impacts on the learning process. This reflects concerns raised in the literature (Entwistle, 2009; Hussey & Smith, 2008; Biesta, 2009) that outcomes need to leave space for elements of uncertainty and varied, personal outcomes if they are to support the development of enhanced teaching and learning in higher education.

## REFERENCES

Adam, S. (2004). *Using Learning Outcomes: A consideration of the nature, role, application and implications for European education of employing "learning outcomes" at the local, national and international levels.* Presented at the United Kingdom Bologna Seminar, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Adam, S. (2008). *Learning outcomes current developments in Europe: update on the issues and applications of learning outcomes associated with the bologna process.* Prepared for the Bologna Seminar: Learning outcomes based higher education: The Scottish experience, 21- 22 February 2008, at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Allan, J. (1996). Learning outcomes in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, *21*, 93–108.

Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning—A new paradigm for undergraduate education, *Change: The magazine of higher learning*, *27*, 12–26.

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education, *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* (Formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education), *21*, 33–46.

Biggs, J. (1999). What the student does: Teaching for enhanced learning, *Higher Education Research & Development*, *18*, 57–75.

Biggs, J. B. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the student does* (McGraw-Hill Education, UK).

Bologna Secretariat (2012). *Making the Most of our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area. Bucharest Communiqué.* In 2012 EHEA Ministerial Conference and 3rd Bologna Policy Forum Documents.

Brandes, D., & Ginnis, P. (1996). *A Guide to Student-centred Learning* (Nelson Thornes).

Brooks, S., Dobbins, K., Scott, J. J. A., Rawlinson, M., & Norman, R. I. (2014). Learning about learning outcomes: The student perspective, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *19*, 721–733.

Elen, J., Clarebout, G., Léonard, R., & Lowyck, J. (2007). Student-centred and teacher-centred learning environments: What students think, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *12*, 105–117.

Enqa (2010). Quality Assurance and Learning Outcomes. Workshop Report 17 (Helsinki, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).

Entwistle, N. J. (2009) *Teaching for Understanding at University* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Ewell, P. (2007). Applying learning outcomes concepts to higher education: An overview. Prepared for the Hong Kong University Grants Committee.

Farrington, I. (1991). Student-centred learning: Rhetoric and reality? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *15*, 16–21.

Greener, S. (2015). What do we mean by "student-centred" learning? *Interactive Learning Environments*, *23*, 1–2.

Hodge, S. (2010). *Student-centred Learning in Higher Education and Adult Education.* Occasional Papers on Learning and Teaching at University of South Africa (UniSA). Paper 3. http://scholar.googleusercontent.com/scholar?q=cache:6aCAaPADXs4J:scholar.google.com/&hl=en&as_sdt=2005&sciodt=0,5

Hussey, T., & Smith, P. (2008). Learning outcomes: Aconceptual analysis, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *13*, 107–115.

Kember, D. (1997). A reconceptualisation of the research into university academics' conceptions of teaching, *Learning and Instruction*, *7*, 255–275.

Kember, D. (2009). Promoting student-centred forms of learning across an entire university, *Higher Education*, *58*, 1–13.

Kennedy, D. (2006). *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A practical guide* (University College Cork).

Lassnigg, L. (2012). 'Lost in translation': Learning outcomes and the governance of education, *Journal of education and work*, *25*, 299–330.

Lea, S. J., Stephenson, D., & Troy, J. (2003). Higher education students' attitudes to student-centred learning: Beyond "educational bulimia"? *Studies in Higher Education*, *28*, 321–334.

Maher, A. (2004). Learning outcomes in higher education: Implications for curriculum design and student learning, *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, *3*, 46–54.

O'neill, G., & Mcmahon, T. (2005). Student-centred learning: what does it mean for students and lecturers. In: **editors?** *Emerging issues in the practice of university learning and teaching* (Dublin, AISHE). http://sclthailand.org/2011/08/student-centered-learning-what-does-it-mean-for-students-and-lecturers/

Otter, S. (1992). *Learning Outcomes in Higher Education. A Development Project Report* (273) (London, UDACE, Further Education Unit. Department of Employment). http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED354397.pdf

Prøitz, T. S. (2010). Learning outcomes: What are they? Who defines them? When and where are they defined? *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, *22*, 119–137.

Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (London, Routledge).

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with "the student experience"? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *32*, 657–667.

Schweisfurth, M. (2011). Learner-centred education in developing country contexts: from solution to problem? *International Journal of Educational Development*, *31*, 425–432.

Sin, C. (2014). Teaching and learning: a journey from the margins to the core in European higher education policy, In: A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area: Between critical reflections and future policies* (Dordrecht, Springer, 325–341).

Smyth, J., & Dow, A. (1998). What's wrong with outcomes? Spotter planes, action plans, and steerage of the educational workplace, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *19*, 291–303.

Stensaker, B., & Sweetman, R. (2014). Impact of assessment initiatives on quality assurance, In: H. Coates (Ed) *Higher Education Learning Outcomes Assessment* (Peter Lang Publishing Group, Part 3, Chapter 3. s 237 -259.).

Tangney, S. (2014). Student-centred learning: A humanist perspective, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *19*, 266–275.

Wright, G. B. (2011). Student-centered learning in higher education, *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *23*, 92–97.

AQ1

461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
495
496
497

# AUTHOR QUERY FORM

Dear Author,
During the preparation of your manuscript for publication, the questions listed below have arisen. Please attend to these matters and return this form with your proof.
Many thanks for your assistance.

| Query References | Query | Remarks |
|---|---|---|
| AQ1 | Query author missing editors name | |
| AQ2 | Please confirm that given names (red) and surnames/family names (green) have been identified correctly. | |