Exploring the enactment of learning outcomes in higher education:
Contested interpretations and practices through policy nets, knots, and tangles

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Publication 3

Publication 4
Summary

This thesis explores learning outcomes (LOs) as a prominent policy and feature of European higher education (HE) reforms. Widely used to describe the learning expected at different levels of education, LO’s emerging role in degree-level practices is explored via interviews with teachers, leaders, and students, from eight degree-programme cases at English and Norwegian universities. These evidence LOs being interpreted and used in planning, teaching, learning and management. The four publications included in this thesis provide detailed accounts of LO practices on various levels, in applications spanning course development, teaching reform and quality assurance. LOs are shown to influence practice, disputing views of them as a purely symbolic or formal policy. However, their application and influence are complex and ambiguous. They can support clear, constructive approaches to planning and teaching, but are also perceived as a problematic, potentially counter-productive way to communicate about learning. Their role in management is still emerging, but they appear to create new opportunities for oversight and steering of teaching, and their growing role in quality assurance seems to create pressure for the development of more specific, measurable LOs. The analysis highlights the challenge of reconciling flexible, open ‘process’ forms of LOs developed for teaching with concrete, measurement-focused ‘product’ LOs needed for oversight or comparison applications. The enactment process presented here is incompatible with simple ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’ perspectives on policy formation, evidencing local adaptation and variety, and examples of highly standardised or rule-based practices. An argument is developed that explaining these findings requires a deliberate engagement with the mess and multiplicity which characterise LOs. A set of metaphors are developed to offer an alternative view of LOs as policy nets, knots and tangles. These convey multiplicity and complexity, while offering new ways to look at relationships between divergent LO forms and practices, explanations for the enactment processes identified, and a way to highlight the key choices HE actors and policy makers confront as they continue to enact LOs in universities.
Sammendrag

I denne avhandlingen undersøkes læringsutbytte (LU) som et sentralt politisk verktøy i europeiske utdanningsreformer i høyere utdanning (HU). LU ble blant annet etablert for å kunne beskrive utbytte av utdanning på tvers i HU, men der iverksetting i praksis kompliseres av at LU også må fortolkes and filtreres på ulike nivåer i utdanningssystemet. I avhandlingen undersøkes LU spesielt i åtte bachelor-program ved norske og engelske universiteter, gjennom intervjuer med lærere, ledere og studenter. De fire publikasjonenviser at LU har innflytelse på praksis som noe mer enn symbolpolitikk, men der bruken og innflytelsen av LU i planlegging, undervisning, læring og ledelse fremstår som kompleks og tvetydig. LU kan understøtte en klar, konstruktiv tilnærming til planlegging og undervisning, men ses også på som en problematisk og potensielt kontraproduktiv måte å kommunisere om læring på. Som styringsverktøy for ledelsen er deres rolle under utvikling, men de ser ut til å skape nye muligheter for tilsyn og styring av undervisning, og de synes å ha en viktig og voksende rolle i kvalitetssikring der en implikasjon er utvikling av mer spesifikke og målbare LUer. Analysen fremhever flere dilemmaer, herunder utfordringen knyttet til at de både kan være fleksible, åpne prosessorienterte verktøy for å utvikle undervisning, og konkrete, målefokuserte produktorienterte indikatorer nødvendige for tilsyn eller sammenligning.

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“I feel like there has to be some complexity. Things can’t just be one thing. It’s more important than ever to let things be a lot of things at the same time. Not make it too easy.”

Robin Miriam Carlsson
1. Introduction: Why and how should we investigate learning outcomes in contemporary higher education?

This doctoral dissertation presents a comparative policy study focused on the way learning outcome (LO) approaches have been put into practice in Norwegian and English higher education, specifically within university degree programmes. It positions LOs as a contested phenomenon. This is based on the significant variety and contradictions in their nature and applications identified in previous research (Prøitz, 2010) and the tendency for LOs to be applied in divergent ways on various levels of educational practice (Hussey & Smith, 2008). The thesis seeks to offer empirical insight on issues at the heart of critics’ and proponents’ views about LO’s intended and emerging influence on contemporary higher education (HE).

The central empirical material is a series of 45 interviews at eight degree-programme cases, focused on the interpretation and enactment of LOs in relation to steering, teaching, and learning. These interviews involved students, teachers, and leaders: key actors encouraged and increasingly required to work with and develop LO approaches. The dissertation comprises four publications and this ‘kappa’ or commentary text. All four publications analyse the nature, role, and significance of LOs in contemporary HE, focusing on differing levels and various aspects of LO approaches and uses (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Overview of publications, related to level of the implementation process

Three of the publications are largely based on the case-study interviews, while one draws on document analysis to investigate LOs in international quality assurance processes (Publication 2) and one draws on both the interviews and prior comparative policy analysis, to take a broader view on implementation in the two case countries (Publication 1). This extended abstract serves
several functions. It clarifies the methodological approach and analytical foundations of the work and offers a commentary on some of the choices made and resulting trade-offs and limitations shaping the research process and outputs. This text also aims to consolidate, integrate, and expand on key findings, insights, and arguments developed through the study and publications. It develops a set of arguments about the ways LOs in higher education tend to be studied and understood, and potential alternative ways to investigate their influence. This introductory section presents the rationale for studying LOs, the approach taken, the central research topic and questions, and an overview of key findings and arguments that are reprised and expanded in the closing sections.

**The increasing salience and potential influence of LOs in European higher education**

LOs have emerged as an increasingly widespread and influential feature in contemporary higher education (Adam, 2004, 2008; Sin, 2014). In Europe in general, and in the two case study countries, England and Norway, this is most obvious in LO’s constitutive role within European and national qualifications frameworks and the Bologna process. LOs provide a unit for defining and describing learning within a developing ‘system architecture’ for higher education, which is intended to offer improved ways to order and link various levels and types of qualifications, and bridge between diverse national education systems (Lassnigg, 2012). This role for LOs might imply they are a relatively formal, technical feature of harmonisation and transparency efforts, with a primarily descriptive function. However, LOs are argued to be potentially positive and transformative by some or damaging and fundamentally unsuited to higher learning by others. Proponents argue LOs support a move away from traditional models of teaching and learning that leave expectations and outcomes too implicit and vague (Allan, 2006). Others suggest a common language to define courses and programmes is vital to mobility, relevance, and accountability; LOs respond to calls to render HE more transparent and accountable (Coates & Mahat, 2014). LOs are said to empower students to make better choices, and study more actively, while teachers will be better equipped to plan, teach, and assess in clear, well-aligned ways (Kennedy, 2007). Critics urge caution, arguing that requiring all higher learning to fit within standardised forms offers an illusory sense of clarity that conflates and confuses different types and levels of learning (Hussey & Smith, 2008). They suggest a LO approach almost inevitably oversimplifies the processes of higher learning and overlooks unexpected or esoteric learning, and so fails to convey critical elements of what universities should be helping students learn (Biesta, 2009). These critics often suggest that LO-based approaches are less about educational reform and more about their potential to provide new steering, accountability, and measurement instruments. In summary then, LOs have become a central feature of EU and national policy, promoted on terms of transparency and harmonisation, but surrounded by significant debate and concerns about their actual influence within universities. This makes them a particularly significant subject for a comparative analysis. This dissertation offers an empirical approach to problematising and investigating assumptions about LO’s meaning, role, and influence in contemporary HE in Norway, England, and internationally.
Despite the significant and far-reaching role LOs have developed in the international policy agenda, and their widespread adoption in ‘formal’ structures such as qualification frameworks and course descriptions, there has, until recently, been little empirical evidence regarding if and how they are understood or applied within universities. In particular, little was known about if and how LOs were put into practice in degree programmes (Casperson et al., 2011), or about the way teachers and students perceived them as an influence in teaching and learning (Havnes & Proitz, 2016). More empirical evidence was needed to help weigh up the many critical and positive claims made about LOs evolving influence. How are LOs understood, worked with or applied within institutions? Are they actually applied in course-level planning or in the information and resources teachers and students use day-to-day? Are they perceived as marking a significant change or just a shift in language, replacing terms like ‘course content’ and ‘objectives’? Are they changing managers’, teachers’, or students’ outlooks, priorities, or practices? Are LOs changing the balance of power in who decides what is to be learnt and how?

As well as responding to the lack of evidence about LOs being put into practice at the degree level, this dissertation work was developed to build on preceding research on LOs. The analytic framework built on earlier analysis of LOs by Proitz, which explored how LOs have been defined and used in academic literature (2010) and described and applied in Norwegian policy documents by various actor groups over recent decades (2014). Proitz developed and applied a four-quadrant framework, based around a range of LO types (open ended, process-oriented, or measurable and results-oriented) and a range of potential uses, either in educational planning and practices, or in accountability and steering (2010). Proitz’s two dimensions and model were combined with Hussey and Smith’s analysis of LOs over educational levels (teaching event, course, and programme) to provide an analytical tool to map the terrain of potential LOs enactment in higher education; this supported the identification of various versions and tendencies in practice. The project also extends some of the insights developed by Elken (2016) in her investigation of the processes of policy development around the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Elken identifies significant complexity and tensions in the policy’s formation and introduction, concluding that, while it is “frequently presented as [a] value-free, technical” solution to translate between qualifications, both its neutrality and standardising potential is questioned by significant tensions and complexities evident in implementation (Elken, 2016). Elken (2016) closes with the question “…are we witnessing a real shift in terms of standardizing education? Is this merely a technical change where formulation of standards will facilitate more mobility, or are we in fact witnessing a more substantial shift where education is becoming increasingly closed-ended, measurable, comparable and standardized?” (p. 94). This thesis offers a way to respond to these questions and extend our understanding of such EU policies’ influence in terms of ground-level practices, through LOs as one key feature of these broader reform agendas.
Approach taken: exploring the enactment of an ambiguous, complex ‘policy object’

The potential to explore these issues comparatively, and gather data from several programme cases across two countries, was facilitated by this dissertation work developing alongside the ‘HELO project’. This Norwegian Research Council funded project aimed “to analyse how learning outcomes are understood, interpreted and practiced in varying higher education contexts…and to clarify to what extent, and under what conditions, learning outcomes result in changes in administrative arrangements, or in teaching and learning activities.”¹ The HELO project team spanned several Norwegian research institutes and HEIs,² and comprised researchers from a range of disciplinary areas. This informed the broad perspective taken on LOs in this dissertation and supported the collection of data across many sites. Some of the analytic tools used here overlap with the HELO project, and publications 1 and 2 involved co-authors from the project team. However, the approaches and perspectives that define this dissertation also developed in distinct ways to the main HELO project.

This dissertation positions LOs as a vague and complex policy idea, referring to a range of practices. It draws on Sin’s (2014b) conceptualisation of the ‘policy object’ as a way of designating the discrete preoccupation(s) of a particular text, tool, agenda, or reform, and investigating how it is enacted. Sin argues we cannot assume these policy objects have an obvious, objective existence, and so scrutiny of enactment must involve attention to both the object’s ‘ontology’ and ‘enacted ontology’: essentially, the ways actors’ develop a sense of what a policy object is, is for, and then put it into practice. The case study interviews provided data about LO enactment from the perspective of leaders, teachers, and students. The development of the interview guide and analysis of the interviews was supported by theoretical perspectives that served to map out the likely range of meanings, uses, and levels of enactment of LOs in degree programmes (Prøitz, 2010; Hussey & Smith, 2008) and which highlighted potential tensions or diverging enactments. The contemporary nature of LOs as a reform promoted and driven (at least in part) from the European level, and this interest in investigating how this might play out in practices within degree-programmes, required an elaboration of how the policy enactment was conceptualised and how various levels of policy and practice might relate. The implementation staircase devised by Reynolds and Saunders (1987) offered a metaphor to clarify how LO enactment was assumed to be a multi-stage, multi-level process, creating opportunities for various ‘versions’ of LOs to be developed and enacted in parallel. This view of policy implementation assumes considerable potential for variation and divergence between the stated aims and what plays out in practice. This provided a framework for the thesis with room to compare varied enactments in varied ‘locations’ and consider how relationships between sites and levels might be explained.

¹ See project overview: https://www.uv.uio.no/iped/english/research/projects/excid-helo/
² The HELO project was led by the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), with partners from the Department of Education at the University of Oslo, the University of Bergen and Oslo Metropolitan University (formerly Oslo and Akershus University College).
These approaches and perspectives are rooted in a critical realist stance, highlighting the dialectic processes involved in policymaking and the mutually constitutive processes of meaning making, social practices, and changing structures. Such a perspective rejects the possibility of taking a ‘value neutral’ stance on complex social phenomena. The aim was to engage critically with LOs, highlighting their contested and complex nature, and interrogating them through theoretical lenses that left ‘room’ to find evidence in line with proponents’ or critics’ arguments about their role and influence. Through the publications and this commentary, LOs are demonstrated to be a rich issue to explore in terms of the social construction of meaning in educational reforms. This thesis underlines that while international reforms such as LOs are often promoted in value-neutral or technical terms, based on ‘good practice’ or transparency as unproblematic ‘goods’, these premises tend to obscure more complex, messy, and normative influences and implications involved in efforts to align and open up higher education systems to greater scrutiny.

The scope of this thesis: LOs as the central object and as a vehicle for wider exploration of contemporary higher education

LOs are the central object of this empirical work, and the common focus of the four publications presented here. However, LOs are not approached as a topic ‘in their own right’ but used as a vehicle for a somewhat broader exploration of issues and ideas that are conceptually and practically ‘tangled up’ with them. The publications explore how actors’ ‘ground level’ perceptions and actions are related to themes including: widespread concerns and pressures for accountability and transparency, the hunt for new ways of measuring learning, shifts in steering and governance approaches, pressures on the roles of students, teachers and managers and realignments of the role and contribution expected from HE. The analyses and discussion consider how LOs are shaped by and feed into these broader debates.

The ways in which LOs are being enacted resonate with depictions of the contemporary HE environment characterised by uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Fullan, 2005; Saunders et al., 2005). Such environments present challenges to researchers, policy makers, and university actors attempting to understand or assess any specific policy change. They create conditions where we may benefit from epistemological and methodological approaches that acknowledge and embrace considerable complexity and mess (Law, 2004; Law & Mol, 2002). The ‘case’ of LOs as a research topic, and the approach taken to it, illustrates some of the challenges and strengths that follow from these perspectives. However, while contradiction and mess are foregrounded in the theoretical lenses and analytical framing of policy enactment, this dissertation does not reflect an embrace of chaos or disorder when it comes to the insights and implications developed. The analyses do not simply stress the presence of mess, ambiguity, and contradiction, but attempt to make sense of why these are such persistent characteristics in LO reforms, the purposes they might serve, the challenges they might present, and how those tasked with using LOs can be equipped with ‘provisional stabilities’ (Saunders et al., 2005) to better orient and guide them in their on-going work with LOs. Finally, the interest in mess and
complexity is important in the generative approach to qualitative analysis taken here (Maxwell, 2012), where in-depth evidence, focused on understanding the ways meaning-making, local contexts, and processes of change meet, is used to generate complex, broad inferences about potential explanations, causes, and future trajectories for LOs.

1.1 Purpose statement and research questions
This analysis and the four publications are focused around the following ‘purpose statement’. This summarises the objectives, method and broader approach taken (Cresswell, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to explore how LOs are enacted as a policy object, from the perspective of teachers, leaders, and students from a range of degree-programme cases, and in two national settings (England and Norway). The interview-based case studies provide detailed accounts of the ways LO’s meaning is constructed and how they are used in planning, teaching, steering, and learning. Comparison across these contrasting disciplinary and national cases helps to identify contextual factors shaping enactment, as well as potential explanations for tendencies in enactment identified. Furthering our understanding about LOs in these ways is important to assess contested claims regarding their influence, and to inform the ongoing choices and actions of HE actors and policy makers.

The study was also guided by a series of more bounded empirical research questions.

- RQ1: How are LOs constructed as a policy object in European policy and through practices described in selected English and Norwegian degree programmes?
- RQ2: If the constructions of LOs vary, what is the nature of this variation? What contextual features, factors, processes, and mechanisms are implicated in constructing LOs meaning and use?
- RQ3: Is there evidence of LO constructions and enactments influencing teaching-learning practices or how teachers and students experience HE?
- RQ4: Is there evidence of LO constructions and enactments influencing management and steering practices or re-shaping the influence managers, teachers, and students have within programmes?

1.2 Summarising the findings and contribution to knowledge
The publications and this commentary text offer a contribution to knowledge of several types. The analysis of ‘ground level’ enactment in the comparative cases, leads to a range empirically-generated insights that enhance our understanding of LO enactment within Norwegian and English university degree programmes. These findings are then related to broader agendas and processes in HE, notably quality assurance processes and the drive towards ‘student-centred’ teaching and learning. The overall findings and contribution represented by this dissertation are reprised and expanded in the closing chapter.

England and Norway are shown to have provided contrasting policy and HE-system contexts
for the arrival and implementation of LO agendas and approaches. While this initially led to
distinct processes and forms of LOs, subsequent dynamics have encouraged more similar forms
and functions. The analysis makes it clear that LOs are received by university actors as a vague
policy object; their meaning must be constructed and stabilised. Actors do this by inferring LOs
role as part of local or national policy priorities, or through relatively ad-hoc processes as actors
relate LOs to the demands of their specific subject areas, department, teaching practices or
student group. Enacting LOs is shown to require considerable work by leaders and teachers,
over several iterations or stages, as they are developed for use on different levels, in different
roles. This illustrates a proliferation of forms and applications of LOs, which then requires
further work to attempt to link up and align these various enactments. This often proves
challenging and inconclusive. The English system and setting, while well acclimatised to LO
ideas over many years, illustrates on-going challenges as actors struggle to ‘fit’ all aspects of
learning into an LO format or use them in more consistent ways to align courses or guide
assessment. The Norwegian HE system was less acclimatised to or prepared for outcome-based
approaches, and their introduction presented a challenge to teaching traditions stressing
individual autonomy in what is taught and how. Despite this, Norway has quite rapidly, and
willingly, enacted LOs in course descriptions and a similar range of uses found in England. In
neither case are there signs of the LO policy object being rejected, strongly resisted, or relegated
to the status of a merely ‘formal’ or symbolic reform. LOs are not demonstrated to be a tool
that is relatively easy to enact, or which clearly is succeeding in standardising teaching or
assessment processes, but they have proved adaptable in the ways they are accommodated and
legitimised in two national settings.

LOs are perceived as having positive roles to play in teaching and learning, but there is little
evidence they will radically change or improve teaching and learning practices. LOs can offer
new, clear formats for course planning and communication about intentions and priorities. They
can play a role in mitigating poor or novice teaching. Alongside these recognised benefits,
respondents also see ways in which LOs create new challenges or risks for teaching and
learning. They legitimise new types of steering which may limit academic autonomy and are
thought to encourage a focus on standardisation and ‘common’ outcomes at the expense of
disciplinarily-defined priorities. Concerns that LOs should be directly linked to assessment, and
made more measurable and concrete, are also seen as a risk. As the LO format cannot capture
many important aspects of higher learning, tight links between intended LOs and what is
assessed may narrow the scope and range of learning in degree courses. If LOs are used in ways
which encourages more tightly specified, pre-determined assessment, this also leaves little
room for teachers’ judgements or student diversity or creativity in performance; this could
undermine students’ learning and teachers’ roles. LOs also emerge as a relatively low-priority
issue when teachers and students are asked about what they believe leads to better teaching and
learning experiences. Both these groups focus on resources for teaching time and feedback,
developing strong relationships with fellow students and teachers, and creating space for
individuals’ interests and motivations; LOs are irrelevant to, or have an ambiguous role to play, in these aspects of learning.

While LOs are translated through diverse contexts and local practice, these varied applications do not seem to function in isolated or unrelated ways. The publications suggest that ‘ground level’ interpretations and enactments by teachers and students are met by processes that ‘tidy up’ the potential for variety, drift and sprawl in LO’s interpretation and forms. National intermediary bodies in the two HE systems, particularly QA bodies, exert an influence via guidelines and expectations that stress the need for more specific, concrete and often standardised forms of LOs. Furthermore, actors’ anticipation of LOs being used as quality standards or for comparison between courses encourages them to assume LOs should be developed towards more concrete and measurable forms. The tensions between these approaches to LO development and use are described through opposing tendencies in LO enactment: towards ‘process’ and ‘product’ forms. These involve different meanings being ascribed to LOs, require divergent kinds of LOs be developed, and result in LOs that serve hard-to-reconcile functions. The tipping point between the process and product forms relates to expectations for LOs to be more directly used in assessment or as a basis for more standardised, comparable learning, requiring relatively concrete, measurable and often more generic product LOs. These have little applicability in the more complex and contextually-specific processes of course planning, communication, and teaching which tend to involve ‘process’ forms of outcomes. The contrasting product and process tendencies also represent an important tension in who is seen as the primary user of LOs. The process form is more of an insiders’ view: a summary of key landmarks within a teaching and learning process in a specific department or discipline, addressing current students and acting to help teachers and student communicate. The product form attempts to describe and define LOs to make them immediately clear to outsiders, such as prospective students, employers, or policy makers.

This extended abstract highlights the complex, contradictory tendencies and patterns in enactment that emerge across publications and levels (see Figure 1). LOs can support or constrain teaching and learning. While they are often argued to support a shift towards more Student Centred Learning (SCL), in practice the relationship between LOs and SCL is ambiguous and potentially opposing. The work of formulating and developing LOs has largely been done by pedagogic staff with an eye on planning, course-coordination, and internal communication. However, by developing these LOs, space is created for new opportunities for oversight and measurement, and for standardising and tidying up more varied ‘ground level’ LOs. Indeed, while ground level enactments reflect a tendency in LOs towards adaptability and ambiguity, as individuals and groups work with them over time, these tendencies are met by oversight and QA forces that seem to create a dynamic where product forms of LOs are prioritised. In this text, in particular the final section (section 6) I develop arguments which respond to and make sense of these patterns. This is important as they present a challenge to
some of the approaches used to position and understand policy and policy implementation processes. The findings require a view of enactment which can reconcile examples of LOs acting as an adaptable, flexible policy object, shaped by local actors and contexts, and examples where they act as a relatively rigid, powerfully-standardising policy object.

These challenges of how we research, make sense of, and relate LOs to wider reform agendas are brought together and expanded on in the closing discussion. An argument in favour of foregrounding and deliberately engaging with LO’s tendency to mess, contradiction and multiplicity is put forward. This is presented as an alternative to a tendency in much of the LO literature to ‘tidy up’ or ‘work around’ these characteristics in two ways. Some (proponents and critics) position LOs as one great wave of reform, a simple intervention that triggers system-wide shifts to an outcomes-orientation, bringing new ways of teaching, learning and organising HE. Others approach LOs ‘as if’ they represent a series of discrete tools or interventions, which can be studied within a tightly bounded area of practice, for example as tools for constructive alignment, or international coordination. While these positions make LOs more manageable as a topic for investigation, neither capture the findings and analyses developed here, and each risk over-looking the ways that diverse LO enactments seem to be related and inter-dependent.

A set of three metaphors, of LOs as a policy net, policy knots and policy tangles, is put forward as an alternative way to make sense of, link and extend some of the conceptual and empirical quagmires in the LO literature. In applying these metaphors to the findings and wider LO literature, I argue that multiplicity and ambiguity is central to the way enactment is playing out, their attractiveness as a reform idea, and to explaining the tensions identified between various forms of LOs in practice. I also use the metaphors to highlight challenges and choices faced in ongoing LO implementation. The notion of transparency is argued to be a central feature of the LO ‘net’, that inter-twines two contrasting notions of transparency, one related to student-centredness or empowerment, one related to oversight, standardisation and control. The drive towards this later form of transparency is argued to conflict with central features of ‘higher’ learning when taken too far; neither personal transformation nor disciplinary expertise can be fully ‘unpacked’ for outsiders, assessed or measured directly. LO’s potential to be all things to all people, to provide new ways to measure and compare what HE systems do, can only be combined with a meaningful pedagogic role if we tangle LO enactments up with notions of learning and evaluation which reject direct, value-neutral assessment of learning, and accept a necessary role for expert judgement and emergent, unexpected outcomes.
2. Contextualising the study

“To the potential learner, the learning outcomes describes what will be learnt, to the potential employer they describe what should have been learnt, to the quality agencies they provide a system for audit, and for the funders (if there are still any left) they provide a means to account for how the money was spent” (Scott, 2011:1).

2.1. Approach and scope of the review of literature

Many of the authors who have attempted to map and analyse the spread or significance of LO approaches in HE policy, stress how this is made difficult by their very considerable instability and ongoing disagreement about LO’s nature and uses. Scott’s description (above) highlights how the term is understood and wielded differently by various actors. Hussey and Smith (2008) argue that as LOs have become more prominent in reforms, their potential meaning and application have sprawled in ways that make assessing their role or influence challenging; to a great extent this depends which ‘version’ of LOs you focus on. Attempts to clarify LOs often end in the conclusion that there is more ideological diversity than can be contained in a single definition (Martin, 2014). Prøitz’s work (2010) identifies significant variation in the ways LOs are conceptualised and used in education, arguing they can be understood as spanning two major debates. First, whether they should be expressed in terms that are closed, stable, pre-specified, and measurable or terms that are open-ended, flexible, and of limited measurability. Second, how far LOs are applied as a tool for accountability or a tool for educational planning and development purposes (Prøitz, 2010). The analytical framework used in this dissertation accepts this potential for variety and sprawl in the way LOs are defined and applied, building on Prøitz’s work in the analytic framework (Section 3). This review does not, therefore, go into detail regarding more theoretical or philosophical debates about the nature of LOs. Nonetheless, the conceptual and applied instability that often seems to characterise LOs in education presents challenges in reviewing the relevant literature around them. Boote and Beile (2005) and Montuori (2005) highlight this kind of challenge as common in educational literature reviews: ways must be found to summarise and order material that is complex, diffuse, and spans various disciplines. Such review cannot be exhaustive and are inevitably a map of key ‘terrain’ the author has selected (Montuori, 2005). Finding the boundaries for an appropriately broad discussion of perspectives, contributions, and discourses on LOs has been guided by the need to a) provide context regarding LO’s significance at the time of the study’s initiation (2013); b) to complement the more focused reviews within the four publications; and c) situate this work in relation to broader historical and scholarly work on LO approaches (Boote & Beile, 2005).

The approach has moved between systematic review processes and phases of more open-ended exploration of the literature. At the project’s inception (in 2013) systematic searches were conducted for the term ‘learning outcome(s)’ in combination with ‘higher education’, ‘university’, ‘policy’, ‘reform’, and ‘implementation’ via databases, including ERIC (Educational Research Sciences database), The University of Oslo’s publication databases, and Google Scholar. LO’s status as an EU-initiated reform also required searches for LO-related
publications via European Commission databases and Cedefop’s archive. Relevant publications spanned disciplinary areas including: policy analysis (political science, international policy), pedagogic studies (educational sciences/psychology/learning research), curricula studies (organizational and learning perspectives), and philosophical and psychological discussions of learning theories and the nature of learning. One limit to this potentially huge territory was a decision to focus on literature about LOs in higher education. In many cases, certainly in England and Norway, LOs emerged in secondary or vocational education before HE (Otter, 1992, Prøitz, 2014). The review is structured as follows. The first section addresses the roots of the LO idea, and important waves of outcome-based reforms preceding contemporary interest. The next section looks at the role and significance of LOs as part of the EU and Bologna agenda, and some broader international LO initiatives. Evidence about how such internationally-led reforms tend to fare during national implementation is discussed next. The review then takes a broad-brush approach to literature from diverse areas to identify various ways in which LOs might influence practice in management, steering, educational planning, teaching, and learning. A final section summarises a recently accumulating body of literature on LO implementation and influence in HE, on the national and sub-national levels; this is the body of literature this dissertation most directly contributes to.

2.2. Roots and history: previous waves of outcome-based education

LOs today can be seen as a continuation of outcome-based education approaches with a long history (Lassnigg, 2012; Adam, 2004; Priestly, 2016; Havnes & Prøitz, 2016), notably objectives-based educational reforms, taxonomies of learning, and rationalist perspectives on educational planning (Allan, 1996; Stoller, 2015; Priestly, 2016). The recent focus on LOs has been argued to be symptomatic of a revival of behaviourist ideas and approaches in higher education (Murtonen, Gruber & Lehtinen, 2017) and certainly more ‘behaviourist’ versions of LOs seem to be ‘gaining ground’ in many contemporary reforms (Havnes & Prøitz, 2016). To weigh up such claims, this review sets out key perspectives from long-running behaviourist and rational planning approaches to education with some overlaps with today’s LO reforms, and describes key features and challenges in the wave of outcome-based reforms to HE in the 1990s.

The overlap between scientific management (Taylorist) approaches to education, ‘objectives models’ of education (Tylerist), and LO approaches are widely noted and worth describing in some detail. The Taylorist process management model developed in manufacturing but became a common reference point in reforms that sought to rationalise educational programmes and measure their outputs to monitor success. The logic is that if we define clear educational units through detailed plans and then implement these correctly, we can monitor for, and achieve, success (Helsby & Saunders, 1993). Tyler’s objective-based education provided a particular variety of ‘rational-planning’ in education that was prominent from the 1940s on, focusing on...
formulating statements of educational objectives, classified by type, which could be linked to
behavioural objectives, and concrete situations for performance and assessment (Christie &
Alkin, 2011). While Taylorist and Tylerist ideas are distinct, they share strong rationalistic
assumptions about education as a ‘plannable’ process, a focus on efficiency and standardisation,
and a belief that systematic measurement of educational outputs is both feasible and desirable.
However, even these early rationalist ideas were accompanied by attempts to build in or engage
with broader forms of learning than those most easily measured or defined. Helsby and
Saunders (1993) note that Tyler intended to encourage more open and diverse educational
evaluation than the psychometric testing dominant at the time, by systematising a wider range
of learning. Allan (1996) also argues that Tyler did not only consider behaviourist outcomes,4
but thought it possible to include thinking and feeling, but these broader aims were undermined
by concerns to find assessment approaches based on an “achievable, tangible and therefore
observable product of learning which is capable of being specified in advance.” (p. 94). Tyler’s
ideas were taken up in Mager’s instructional objectives approach in the 1960s and Popham’s
objectives-based evaluation, both of which asserted explicitly behaviourist assumptions; indeed,
Popham’s stated intention was to escape the educationalists’ ‘preoccupation’ with process and
to re-focus attention on observable behaviour and performance (Christie & Alkin, 2011; Allan,
1996). Developing alongside these objectives-based, rationalist visions of education, were
efforts to define and assess learning based on taxonomies. Scholars such as Mager and Gagné
argued that, if learning could be mapped similarly to biological taxonomies, research could
proceed despite the ‘black box’ uncertainty about how cognition or learning worked (Murtonen
et al., 2017). The most well-known and influential taxonomy to emerge from these efforts was
Bloom’s (Bloom et al., 1956). While some see Bloom’s taxonomy as a classic behaviourist tool
(Murtonen et al., 2017) others argue it offers a relatively broad mapping of educational
outcomes, including complex cognitive outcomes (beyond recall or recognition) and one which
later built in ‘affect-oriented’ objectives such as awareness and appreciation (Kraiger et al.,
1993). Gagné also sought to identify and arrange types of learning in a hierarchical taxonomy,
and also rejected arguments that outcomes were necessarily limited to behavioural objectives
as attitudinal learning outcomes should be considered a significant area (Kraiger et al., 1993).
This underlines how long-standing debates about the range of types of learning such typologies
can encompass are. A final feature of these rationalist mapping and planning approaches is their
tendency to be used as a way to move the task of identifying and prioritising learning objectives
out of the hands of teachers or educationalists, into the hands of central authorities or external
experts (Helsby & Saunders, 1993). Indeed, one of the advantages proposed for educational
objectives and directly assessable outcomes is the promise of ‘teacher-proof’ materials that
offer standardisation and a reliable process irrespective of who administers them (Allan, 1996).

4 Allan (1996) provides an in-depth discussion of the way these early outcome-based educational proponents
related their approaches to ideas of learning; it makes clear that while behaviorist assumptions were certainly
significant, the use of the term ‘outcomes and objectives’ has always been slippery and open to alternative uses.
Concerns and critiques about these approaches gained momentum, particularly during the ‘cognitive turn’ in the 50s and 60s. Many of their underpinning assumptions and methods were challenged as psychology and linguistics started to open up the ‘black box’ of learning and undermined mechanistic-linear models of learning and taxonomies of learning (Christie & Alkin, 2011; Morshead, 1965). The ideas that educational research could proceed in the same way as the natural sciences, or that educational planning could mimic manufacturing, were increasingly dismissed as reductionist, especially in the case of ‘higher’ learning (Allan, 1996). Objectives or outcome-based approaches were critiqued as relying on flawed notions of learning and an illusory sense of order: Morshead (1965) argued that Bloom’s taxonomy was an “ontology without logic” as, while its authors stated it was not intended to describe truly distinct categories, and represented a fairly ‘arbitrary’ abstraction of educational objectives, it was used as a tool to study and measure learning via disaggregated components.

Despite the significant critique and practical challenges earlier iterations of outcome-based education faced, in particular attempts to find valid, stable approaches to the measurement of learning, LOs came back into focus in a wave of national curricula and qualification reforms in the late 1980s and 90s. In this period, LOs were taken up in reform efforts focused on integrating and mapping academic and vocational qualification and training systems, in support of lifelong learning ideas (Adam, 2008). Particularly strong examples of these competency-based reforms were found in the UK and Australia, but outcome-based reforms and qualifications frameworks were also introduced in countries including South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Scotland, and Ireland. These reforms saw disparate types and levels of education re-described in the common format of ‘learning outcomes’, providing (in principle) a neutral, flexible way of capturing learning regardless of the setting or subject involved (Young, 2003). While this approach no longer sounds radical, Young notes that until the 1980s it was assumed that school, vocational, and university qualifications were so different as to be ‘non-comparable’, and so defining qualifications or success criteria was generally accepted as relying on the professional judgement by teachers and academics (2003).

The South African case has been analysed in detail and exemplifies key challenges experienced in the implementation of this prior wave of objectives-based reforms (Allais, 2007a, 2007b; Botha, 2002). The stated rationale for the South African reforms immediately suggested the ambition and divergence that became apparent during its implementation. An outcome-based qualification framework was argued to be a way to unite disparate qualification routes, ensure consistent standards and forms, enhance training opportunities for a growing economy and support the liberation agenda by making a divided, hierarchical system more accessible and flexible (Allais, 2007a, 2007b). Allais notes that, in this regard, these reforms present an argument for LO reforms rooted in social-constructionist notions of learning: the apartheid system had elevated some types of learning and downgraded others, but LOs presented a relativistic stance regarding the value of knowledge, where academic knowledge was not
necessarily ‘better’ than other forms, and where diverse types of education and training could linked with minimal hierarchy (Allais, 2007a). The implementation of the reforms floundered. The new National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was introduced in 1995, reviewed in 2001, and repeatedly reformed, but by 2006 the reform was ‘stuck’ (Allais, 2007a). Ensor (2003) and Allais (2007a) both argue that the problems that beset the reform sprung from excessive ambition and underestimating how complicated implementation would be. Ensor (2003) suggests attempting to bring all forms and levels of education and training under one system, in one reform ‘swoop’, was over-ambitious, especially as it involved a ‘strict’ interpretation of how outcomes had to be used and developed. Allais (2007a) also notes the ambition of mapping all learning in one form and one framework but focuses more on fundamental problems with LO approaches taking a relativistic approach to knowledge, as she argues “there needs to be a basis for deciding what should be taught…there is nowhere to start. It is, in a sense, a non-theory of knowledge” (p. 73). Having removed the structures that defined or prioritised certain bodies of learning, attempts to ‘start from outcomes’ tended not towards simple, elegant solutions, but to complexity and mess; attempts to create transparent descriptions and unambiguous assessment criteria resulted in ‘spirals of specificity’, where outcomes were elaborated in ever greater detail, without ever being clear or concrete enough (Allais, 2007a).

Similar arguments regarding this wave of outcome-based qualification reforms were also made by Knight (2001) who suggested that the appeal of using outcomes to create more coherent curricula is rarely achievable, as attempts to clarify complex learning often backfire: ‘Clarification leads to complication which is why lists of outcomes grow like mould and become unwieldy’ (p. 373). Muller (1998) commenting on the South African and New Zealand outcome-based reforms also underlines a tendency for these to be put forward as a ‘panacea-type of reform’, reconciling personal, social, and economic goals in education and presented as a reform that will work ‘for’ a whole range of actors, despite them requiring LOs of quite varied types and roles. Young (2003) takes up the issue of divergent or contradictory purposes being pursued via LO reforms in this period, highlighting tensions between LOs to serve accountability ends or educational ends and arguing that accountability purposes tend toward tightly specified outcomes, pulling against outcomes needed to accommodate learning that involves judgement, risk taking, and variety.

The 80s and early 90s also saw new national qualification frameworks in the UK as part of major reforms to post-compulsory education (following the Dearing report). These aimed to link vocational and academic qualifications, provide clearer information about courses, and develop explicit standards (Adam, 2004). Scott (2011) suggests we should see these LO reforms as developing hand in hand with national quality assurance processes; LOs met the need for new these formats to define, assess, and compare standards that quality assurance processes created. Hussey and Smith (2002) see rise of LOs in the UK as driven by demands for greater accountability and demonstrable impact, as well as a part of the commoditisation of education. LOs provide a unit and description for the ‘goods’ on offer in the educational market (Scott,
While these reforms proved relatively successful and have been retained in on-going reforms of qualifications frameworks, they also illustrate some tensions and challenges in implementing LOs. Scott (2011) focuses on the initial experience of devising LOs for the new frameworks, and the near-impossibility of finding outcomes general enough to allow for diversity in practices and performance, but specific enough to link them to assessment in a fairly direct way. Hussey and Smith (2002) argue that the UK experience of developing these frameworks illustrated that LOs can only effectively explicate learning within subject areas, as they rely on subject-or discipline-specific interpretations of key words and terms. The learning LOs convey to disciplinary experts or insiders may remain relatively opaque to outsiders such as prospective students or employers. James (2005) suggests that LOs developed a distinctive meaning and role as they were implemented in different education sectors in the UK. Further education tended to recognise LOs neatly lined up with statements of performance or competence, while HE developed a broader notion of LOs with more of a quality assurance role than an assessment role, providing a way to ‘benchmark’ some learning, and ensure similar standards across undergraduate degrees. Similarly to Allais (2007a), James emphasis the gap between LO’s promise of order and clarity, and a tendency towards complexity and tension in practice. While LOs offer “all the appearance of a concept that ‘cuts to the chase’, and refers to “matters about which there is high consensus” James argues this conceals real and fundamental complexity regarding “differences in what outcomes of learning are seen as desirable and which are celebrated, and by whom…in other words, questions of social difference, culture and power” (2005, p. 93).

These earlier waves of outcome-based reforms and qualification frameworks illustrate tendencies that are relevant today. This review underlines LO’s origins and persistent appeal as a way to make learning more explicit, orderly, consistent and measurable. However, stricter or narrower versions of LOs have been accompanied by critiques calling for, and often winning room for, more flexible and less measurement-focused LOs to play a role. As Prøitz (2010) notes, LOs can and have been linked to diverse types of outcomes and theories of learning. It would be naive to ignore the behaviourist and rationalist assumptions and approaches evident in LO’s roots and prior reforms, but we cannot assume these tendencies characterise today’s reforms. The question raised by this history is which forms and applications of LOs are most prominent today, and how far room is left for a range of types or LOs to play a role. Previous outcomes-based qualification reforms demonstrate a tendency to pursue ambitious, divergent goals. Social or pedagogic aims are often pursued in tandem with accountability or economic imperatives, despite these likely requiring different types of outcomes when it comes to implementation (Young, 2003; Bouder, 2003; Muller, 1998). Finally, the promise that LOs will create greater simplicity and clarity has often unravelled when it comes to implementation. Achieving and enacting transparency or ‘direct’ and unambiguous approaches to measuring LOs has proved complex and challenging. Previous reforms demonstrate the pitfalls of excessive specification, detail and rigidity, which tends to occur when measurability and direct
links to assessment are pursued. There are ongoing tensions regarding how much flexibility or fuzziness should be retained in and around LOs, to allow for variety in performance and for subject-specific interpretation and judgement. The relevance of these tendencies in contemporary reforms is further clarified in the following sections.

2.3. LOs as part of the European HE agenda and international policy
This section analyses the way in which LOs emerged as a central part of Bologna and European Higher Education Area (EHEA) processes, and how their role has shifted over time and demonstrates them being attached to an increasing range of activities, functions, and aims. LOs need to be understood not only in terms of their ‘formal’ role within the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), but as a policy tool and policy agenda that has developed as a much broader, central, and complex role within the EHEA and Bologna process over time (Sin, 2014a). They have evolved from their initial role as a way to describe qualifications, to a point where they are argued to be a central device for achieving radical reforms in European HE (Adam, 2008). This analysis also highlights the contrast between the technical, value neutral ways that the EQF and LO forms are often promoted, and applications of LOs intended to drive quite significant changes in core educational practices and values (Cort, 2010; Adam, 2008; Lasnigg, 2012).

The integration of European higher education has been an area of intense activity, reform, and influence since the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999. Bologna objectives included the creation of easily readable and comparable degree systems; the establishment of a transferable system of credits; the promotion of staff and student mobility; and the building up of quality assurance systems in accordance with European recommendations and guidelines. The original declaration also stated an intention to construct a European Higher Education Area in order to increase the international competitiveness, attractiveness, and comparability of European HE. Learning outcomes were not mentioned in the original Bologna Declaration or the Prague Communiqué 2001 but have become increasingly prominent as a way of achieving these Bologna objectives (Adam, 2008). The Lisbon summit in 2000 clarified that signatory countries had moved away from the principle of subsidiarity and accepted efforts towards the convergence of HE structures and policies (Amaral, Neave, Musselin, & Maassen, 2009). However, achieving convergence has proved challenging and slow. A decade after the original Bologna declaration there were widespread concerns that while some structural convergence had been achieved, progress towards compatibility and comparability was too slow (Sin, 2012b). In particular there was concern as to how significant uniformity in approaches to teaching and learning could be achieved (Kehm & Teichler, 2006). LOs, have emerged as a key way for European reforms to ‘drill down’ to have more direct influence on national curricula, course content, and teaching (Schomburg & Teichler, 2011).

The development of a common qualification framework was agreed on in the Berlin declaration in 2003, and the EQF that has been developed since relies on LOs as the unit or format to define
and describe learning. LOs are here defined as “Statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning”5. By providing a series of eight ‘reference levels’, the EQF offers a common framework that describes various educational levels to which national systems can be linked, or in many cases, which has provided a blueprint for significant re-design of national systems. The EQF and LOs are presented as a flexible tool for all types of education which can link and accommodate varied national systems. The Berlin Communique stated that signatories should “elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile” and also that “degrees should have different defined outcomes [to] accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market need”.6 The intentions ascribed to the EQF, and LO’s role in this, build on diverging principles: that they aim at international compatibility, but also respect the need for national autonomy and flexibility across programmes (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2010; Helgøy & Homme, 2013). As Huber (2012) points out that, “A key problem in the establishment of the EHEA is to make the performance of students and institutions comparable even if they originally were declared and designed to be incommensurable” (p. 212). The promotion of the EQF and LO formats stresses their potential as a ‘translation’ device, making qualifications more transparent for applicants and employers, more readable across countries and systems, and so providing an effective link between national systems (European Commission, 2008). The use of LOs specified in terms of knowledge, skills, and competence, is also argued to create common ways to capture learning irrespective of where it was developed, making it possible to link diverse academic, vocational, formal, and informal settings (European Commission, 2008). However, this role as a translation device or transparency tool raises questions that are rarely explicitly addressed: who is gaining greater influence and who is served by this ‘opening up’ of education? (Cort, 2010). These tensions play out in debates about the intentions, rationale, and influence of LOs as part of European reforms. The way that LOs have been implemented within EQF-aligned frameworks is significant here. Implementation from the European to the national level has been pursued through an Open Method of Coordination (OMC) mode of governance, using ‘soft’ intergovernmental approaches to attempt to balance the intention to achieve unity and common action, with respect for diversity (Helgøy & Homme, 2013). The introduction of new EQF-aligned, LO-based national frameworks and curricula, has therefore relied on voluntary agreements to meet certain timelines, agree common guidelines and regulations, set targets and develop new indicators to track progress, all of which serve to drive forward implementation without compulsion from above (Helgøy & Homme, 2013). Lassnigg (2012) stresses that the EQF and LOs are intended to promote a much broader ‘outcome orientation’ which is also

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promoted through a wider array of educational and training policies and tracked through benchmarks based on LOs (2012).

As LOs moved into use as a way to describe specific degree programmes and courses, they have developed a central role in ongoing debates about curricula reform and are seen as having the potential to challenge fundamental ideas about the way education is conceptualised, prioritised, organised, and steered (Karseth, 2008; Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016). The adoption of EQF-aligned curricula based on LOs has been argued to challenge the values of a traditional, academic-led higher education, and discipline-based knowledge as the structure underpinning curricula (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016). The function of LOs as an internationally ‘common currency’ does not simply make what is ‘gained’ through education more transparent, but raises concerns that these changes lead to the commodification of learning, fundamentally re-drawing relationships around teaching, learning, and the role of HE in society (Hussey & Smith, 2002).

This creates further tensions between instrumental, employability-focused education and the traditional academic values and ways of ordering knowledge (Karseth, 2008, p. 92), and new opportunities for transparency in terms of measurement, auditing, and the further undermining of academics and trust within HE (Power, 1997). Bjørnvol and Coles (2007/8) take up the argument that LOs have the potential to transform HE systems, suggesting that, “Introducing NQFs based on learning outcomes alters the point of equilibrium of governance in education and training systems. Additionally, we propose there are general shifts of position of the key actors where consumers of qualifications, mainly individuals and businesses are likely to be empowered at the cost of providers” (p. 231). These changes in the balance of power between actor groups, and between international and national levels, are accompanied by expectations that LO’s influence will extend into all levels of HE practices, to re-shape teaching in a way that encourages learning-focused or student-centred approaches (Adam, 2004, 2008; Allan, 2006; Otter 1992; Lasnigg, 2012). Indeed, Adam (2008) sees LOs and student-centred learning as powerfully, even inevitably linked: “It is important to recognise that student-centred learning necessitates the use of learning outcomes as the only logical approach. It produces an automatic focus on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments. There is a cascade effect that links the use of learning outcomes, the selection of appropriate teaching strategies, and the development of suitable assessment techniques” (p. 13). Sin (2014) notes that the importance of LOs and SCL within the Bologna have developed in parallel with one another, as was particularly apparent in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, which reiterates the commitment to student-centred learning and calls for ‘meaningful implementation’ of learning outcomes as necessary to achieve Bologna goals and meaningful progress (2014). While SCL is often associated with approaches intended to enhance learning and empower students (McMahon & O’Neill, 2005) the notion of learner-centeredness arguably provides a palatable cover for promoting education along more consumerist or transactional terms, and thereby obscuring other concerns about the purpose of learning, nature of learning, or values in higher education (Biesta, 2004). In such ways, LOs can be understood as one of multiple factors that
illustrate a view of HE as a primarily socio-economic lever, with an emphasis on Europe’s future as a knowledge economy. Their role in consistency, commonality, and transparency is argued to be necessary to achieve lifelong learning goals, and better links and relevance between training, education and labour markets (Werquin, 2007; 2012). Certainly, they are seen as a tool that puts the common concerns that HE must be more relevant and responsive to labour market and graduate employers into practice in quite a concrete way (Schomburg & Teichler, 2011). Gornitzka and Maassen note that it is “virtually taken for granted that the socio-economic development of a society is becoming more and more dependent on the way knowledge is produced, transferred, and handled” and this inevitably encourages a contemporary focus on universities as socio-economic levers (2000, p. 225). Again, these changes have played into fundamental debates about whether a focus on employability and demonstrable outcomes from HE might undermine academic learning, research activity, the value of knowledge for its own sake, or the role of HE in personal development and the development of citizens (Barnett, 2000b; Schomberg & Teichler, 2011).

A more recent area of European developments where LOs have gained prominence is efforts to develop common quality assurance guidelines and systems (Adam, 2008). In particular, the use of LOs has been a common and necessary feature of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) ‘Standards and Guidelines’ since 2007 (ENQA, 2009). LOs are acting as a format not just for describing learning, but for defining and assessing HE quality (Havnes & Proitz, 2016). These efforts are commonly presented as a response to widespread demands for more detailed and robust information about the impact of university degrees for individuals and society (Adamson et al., 2010).

In summary, the official European-level discourse around LOs initially positioned them as a descriptive form, providing a common unit for the EQF alignment process and as a relatively technical, neutral tool which was flexible enough to allow for significant national and disciplinary differences. Over time their applications and influence sprawled across levels and areas of practice. Havnes and Prøitz (2016) suggest that LOs can now be seen as carrying a “double intention of changing higher education systems and the mind set associated with teaching and learning practices” through their role in defining and assessing quality, and their role in a shift or realignment in teaching and learning (Havnes & Proitz, 2016, p. 206). This sums up the role LO’s have come to play in ongoing efforts to change teaching practices, develop new forms of accountability and quality assurance, and align national systems. This summary of the development of LOs within Europe also explains how LOs have come to be seen as a reform which ‘talks to’ or is ‘for’ diverse actors, including policymakers at international and national levels, leaders, teaching staff, course planners and administrators, students, and employers (Havens & Prøitz, 2016). This builds in considerable scope for complexity and mess, as LOs are defined and applied in differing ways by these groups (Scott, 2011; Prøitz, 2014). Before turning to evidence about how earlier EU-led convergence reforms
have succeeded, we briefly turn to examples of LO reforms and ideas promoted on the international and global levels.

2.4. International LO initiatives beyond Europe

Outside of the EU/Bologna processes, various attempts have been made in recent years to use LOs to organize and reform curricula and qualification systems and provide new ways to define and assess student learning. One of these is the ‘Tuning Project’, which began in 2000, as a programme that was intended to establish ways to align curricular structures, programs, and teaching across the various national systems in Europe and beyond to non-EU countries, with the aim of integrating quality standards, HE structures and curricula (Kehm, 2010). The Tuning Project focused on the level of disciplinary areas and aimed to develop practical guidance for the development of more comparable degree structures via credit transfer and accumulation systems, generic and subject-specific competences, changes in teaching, learning, and assessment and processes for the enhancement of educational quality. In this way, the Tuning Project developed links between learning outcomes, competences, and ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) workload-based credits. (Kehm, 2010).

Another recent incarnation of LO ideas can be seen in the OECD’s Ahelo project. Ahelo sought to measure graduate competences in terms of subject-specific components (initially economics and engineering) as well as a range of generic skills such as critical thinking or problem solving, to be assessed via standardised skills tests (Ewell, 2012). This project was seen as ambitious and controversial. Ahelo was seen by many as the OECD attempting to develop comparison-focused, standardised indicators for HE in a similar vein to the PISA and TIMMS studies, with all the attendant appeal for policy makers, and problems in measurement validity and reporting these earlier studies involve (Ewell, 2012). It was argued to be a response to persistent and escalating demands for new instruments that offer more concrete and comparable information on what students learn (Nusche, 2008; Ashwin, 2015) and a reaction to the globalisation of HE, and the subsequent ‘vacuum’ in terms of valid and reliable learning metrics which could be compared internationally (Van Damme, 2015). Ashwin (2015) questioned Ahelo’s comparative ambitions, suggesting the aim of developing a ‘simple and robust measure of the comparative quality of learning outcomes’ was essentially impossible on its own terms, a ‘mirage’ that “obscures the necessity of more complex, local efforts to define and pursue high quality education” (Ashwin, 2015:438). This initiative did indeed prove problematic and appears unlikely to be continued following the pilot. It does, however, illustrate the desire to identify and apply LOs in significant ways to facilitate comparison across national and disciplinary boundaries.

2.5. Implementing EU reforms in national & institutional practices

While LOs have clearly become more prominent as an idea and aim in EU policy, considerable disagreement and confusion remain about how far this translates into application or changes on the ground. At the time this project began, questions were raised about how far the relatively
rapid progress in implementing NQFs and LO formats would lead to changes in practice (Lassnigg, 2012), and there was little evidence about LO’s role in programme-level implementation (Caspersen et al., 2011). The potential for such ‘ground-level’ uptake and influence of LOs can be seen in relation to a number of previous studies of the implementation of European higher education reforms across a range of nations (Paradeise, Reale, Bleiklie, and Ferlie, 2009; Kogan et al., 2006). These comparative studies of implementation focus on how common ideas or reforms have played out nationally and sub-nationally, and offer various explanations for the varying success of EU-initiated policies in terms of implementation and consistency. These studies generally identify shifts towards common governance structures and priorities, but on-going national diversity and variety in the more specific ways reforms are interpreted and accommodated in existing structures, practices and priorities. This body of research also stresses that Bologna and EHEA processes are not only about new rules and the building of shared structures, but changes in values achieved via softer, more complex webs of influence including normative pressure and competition. Gornitzka (2006) has identified various ways in which the EU wields surprisingly powerful influence, outside of formal agreements or mechanisms. Even if specific applications or uses of LOs are not mandated through the Bologna process or other agreements, it is entirely possible that an ‘accepted’ or ‘best practice’ version has or will emerge, leading to competition between states to achieve implementation along those lines. Such ‘soft law’ approaches to reform do still tend to leave scope for variations to develop, as academic communities influence the implementation of processes and policy tools (Sin, 2012; Lassnigg, 2012).

Research on the Bologna Process generally ‘stopped’ at the level of national take-up and implementation of objectives until a decade or so ago (Ravinet, 2008; Sin, 2012). There has been a growing realisation that implementation should be considered and investigated in relation to responses to Bologna at the institutional and ‘ground’ levels. Neave and Amaral’s work identified the need to consider European processes in relation to both the political domain or level, ‘the pays politique’, and to investigate influence at the institutional and practice level, ‘the pays reel’, suggesting that ‘take up’ at the national system level often “masks spectacular deviance at lower levels” (2008, p. 53). They also pointed out that, “When the level of analysis moves below the nation level, earlier claims to plausibility are often subject to severe strain, unless one re-aggregates the earlier results in the light of the information provided from the lower level” (Neave & Amaral, 2008, p. 54). Inherent tensions and contradictions in Bologna reforms often play out and come to the fore as they are implemented over the various policy levels (Kehm, 2010). Different nation-states often interpret and handle supra/transnational policy initiatives emanating from the Bologna Process, including changes to qualification frameworks, in very different ways (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2010). Overall, opinions vary about the balance of influence we can expect to find between international actors/levels, such as the EU, and national actors or more micro systems in HE. Elken & Stensaker (2011) argue that any analysis of EU policy must “acknowledge the limited powers of the EU within the higher
education area”. They tend to agree with those who suggest that higher education policy is still primarily led from the nation level (Ferlie et al., 2008). Ravinet (2008) disagrees, arguing that, while the EU leverages influence through processes and tools, obligations or normative pressures, rather than making nations comply with Bologna policies in full, this nonetheless makes it impossible for them to deviate too far or go in directions which oppose the drift of Bologna reforms.

During the time this study has developed, EU tracking reports have shed some light on the implementation of learning outcomes at the institutional level. The EUA trends report tracks the uptake of key Bologna processes and structures and the 2015 report notes that, “The implementation of learning outcomes has continued to progress since 2010. Institutions are generally positive about the benefits of learning outcomes, albeit not in all countries. It is clear, however, that in many institutions their implementation appears to have taken place without changing in radical ways how curricula, including examinations, are developed. Therefore, this area is still a work in progress” (Sursock, 2015, p. 13). It is fair to assume that LOs are an increasingly present, familiar feature in European HE institutions, but there remains a need for more evidence regarding their implementation within universities. Previous research on the implementation of EU reforms of HE suggest these are unlikely to be implemented in a simple, direct way, due to diverse channels and mechanisms for influence and adaptation within national and sub-national settings. It seems reasonable to assume there is at least a high potential for complexity and interactions at multiple levels throughout implementation; this makes predicting the success of LO outcomes, like previous policy reforms, challenging (Veiga & Amaral, 2006). The next section moves on to consider literature that might shed light on the kinds of process and mechanisms that may be important during their ongoing implementation within HE institutions.

2.6. LO’s potential influence on teaching, learning, planning & steering

Lassnigg’s (2012) study of LO’s implementation in Austrian concludes that the EQF and LOs should be seen as “an attempt to implement a new governance system at the policy level which promises to change practice in a straightforward way. Thus, qualification frameworks based on learning outcomes are meant to be feasible reform instruments that might change the relationships between actors, the system architecture and pedagogical practice” (2012, p. 300). These emerging ambitions for LO to have such wide-ranging influence create a need for further evidence regarding their use and impact. This analysis of previous literature identified work on HE leadership, HE measurement and accountability, curricula design, pedagogic studies, and changing teaching and learning practices in HE, as identifying and describing various ways in which LOs might lead to changes in practice as they are taken up and worked with by actors within degree programmes. There is also a more recent body of work looking at the impact of specific kind of approaches to using LOs in teaching, learning, and assessment, which may offer ways of addressing challenges and risks identified in earlier literature on LOs role in HE
teaching and learning (Boud, 2017; Balloo et al., 2018). While this section is structured around different levels and types of activity, there are overlaps between these that make it hard to disaggregate LO’s role and influence in these various areas separately; LOs developed for use in certain levels or processes seem to often shape or influence other applications of LOs. This is argued to be crucial to their overall influence in later sections of this discussion.

Planning educational programmes and constructive alignment

Transparency is central to many of the claims made regarding the advantages of LO approaches to course planning: LOs are argued to create greater clarity about aims, but also consistency across teaching activities and assessment approaches. They provide a language and format that make what higher education ‘does’ clearer to stakeholders, particularly students, employers, and policy makers (Ewell, 2007) and a way to plan and organise teaching more explicitly and effectively. This seems to refer quite directly back to LOs roots in ‘rational curriculum design’ (Allan, 1996) and approaches to curricula and course planning that focus on consistency between stated objectives, teaching activities and assessment tasks (Kennedy, 2006). LOs are also widely associated with the Constructive Alignment approach to instructional design called developed by Biggs (1996, 1999, 2011). This is presented as an alternative to traditional teaching in higher education (Biggs, 2011) which makes teaching and learning processes more explicit and encourages students to be more active and adopt deeper approaches to learning (this influence on learning strategy is discussed more in the following sections). This is one way in which LOs are argued to challenge the excessively ‘implicit’ goals and expectations argued to characterise traditional teaching (Kennedy, 2007). Biggs (1996) approach is founded in a systemic view of learning environments, stressing the need for coherence and clarity in all stages of the learning process. However, ‘alignment’ is often invoked as a principle and advantage of LOs in ways that neglect this emphasis on the overall learning environment or system, and instead treat alignment as a ‘design down’ approach, where expected LOs are the starting point from which planning teaching processes proceeds with a focus on achieving and assessing outcomes in a relatively direct way (Kennedy, 2011). Kennedy (2011) also illustrates a tendency to disregard subtleties or tensions about the type of learning pursued, stating, “Whether outcomes based approaches are presented as a behaviourist approach to learning focusing on observable performance, a progressive approach highlighting student centred learning or simply as an accountability tool, its practical application is the same.” This use of constructive alignment ideas as simple planning strategy neglect Bigg’s (1996) own concerns that LOs should not be linked to assessment in blunt, quantitative ways, as these tend to be at odds with a focus on engagement and enhanced learning. However, while Bigg’s constructive alignment claims to be built on constructivist learning principles, Jervis and Jervis (2005) point to what they see as an anomaly: “We cannot reconcile this claim [i.e. to be constructivist] with admonitions to get the students to do the things that the objectives nominate… Students are ‘trapped’ into activities but free to construct the knowledge they may or may not acquire in the process, in their own way. This appears to us to be a constructivist epistemology, which is
embedded in behaviourist pedagogy” (p. 8). Indeed, when Biggs says the aim is to ensure that students are “‘entrapped’ in a web of consistency, optimising the likelihood that they will engage in the appropriate learning activities” (1999, p. 64) it is hard to reconcile with constructivist or student-centred notions of learning.

There is relatively little evidence showing how LOs are used in planning and describing courses or modules within degree programmes. However, reforms in the UK in the 1990s illustrated a tendency for the form, function, and application of LOs to vary across types of institutions. James (2005) studied a large number of HE sites in terms of the LOs they were developing and found differing conceptions of learning outcomes at each, and suggested this reflects differences in conceptions of learning, different forms of learning that were prioritised and established notions of how learning should proceed within these educational communities. Scott (2011) notes such variations are important for two reasons. First, they suggest LOs are being practiced in a highly socially-constructed way. Second, this underlined the potential ways that stating intended outcomes can act to prioritise and deprioritise aspects of learning, with the attendant risk that the areas teachers and students see as important, such as personal and social dimensions of learning, might be left out, as anything not specified as a learning outcome tends to ‘escapes the learning accountants’ (Scott, 2011). This concern that using LOs in educational planning, in ways that quite specifically and concretely set out the expected outputs from university-level learning, has been widely criticised potentially damaging. Biesta (2009) argues that LOs are a key part of shifts to set starker limits and priorities regarding what should be learned, how it should be learned, and ultimately, the aims and values of education. The act of defining what is expected or required as an outcome in such precise terms may have a narrowing or reductive impact on education (Biesta, 2009; Smyth & Dow, 1998). This potential for narrowing also undermines claims that LOs are applicable across all subjects and levels: many educational achievements, particularly advanced achievements, defy assessment and are easily distorted by attempts to break them into discrete elements or aims (Yorke & Knight, 2007).

**How is learning understood and assessed**

Changes in teaching approaches are argued to be necessary in a landscape where students are often making significant contributions to the costs of tuition, have higher expectations (Adam, 2008; ENQA, 2010), and where an increase in student diversity makes traditional forms of teaching, developed for small groups of highly-motivated, able students, unhelpful (Biggs, 1999). Confusingly, LOs are associated both with teaching and learning approaches that take a strongly constructivist, student empowerment stance, one that tend towards instrumentalism which may actually undermine disciplinarily-specialised or personally transformational learning. Ecclestone (1999) notes there is a broad spectrum of LO purposes and approaches. From the ‘liberal end’ we find broad teaching and learning aims, including more intangible elements like aims to ‘foster intellectual independence’, where outcomes cannot be directly linked to assessment. At the other end of the spectrum, we find “detailed, standardized
definitions of learning outcomes, accompanied by similarly specific assessment criteria”,
accompanied by explicit or implicit reference to taxonomies of learning or behaviourist models
of learning (p. 31). The problem often ascribed to the pre-specification of learning outcomes,
and particularly a tight link between expected LOs and assessment, is that it may lead us to
ignore important aspects of learning. Hussey and Smith (2008) argue that the ability to
recognise, respond to, and integrate unexpected learning is a hallmark of good teaching,
referring to McAlpine et al.’s (1999) notion of a ‘corridor of tolerance’, between what is
expected to take place in a learning event and what emerges between the teacher and students
through a learning process. This stresses the importance of leaving room for teachers to decide
what learning outcomes count as relevant, important, or worth pursuing, in a flexible way
(Hussey & Smith, 2003) and to remain aware of the various ways LOs can be understood, as
intended or emergent, or predicted and unpredicted (2008). In situations where we require or
accept the possibility of creative or original contributions or ways of demonstrating learning, it
is important teachers draw on tacit knowledge about what ‘quality’ or a ‘good performance’
looks like in their domain, even though this means the assessment criteria inevitably remain
somewhat ‘fuzzy’ to students (Sadler, 1987).

Prøitz (2010) describes how LOs may be implemented with a more open sense of LOs as
whatever results from education, including unintended changes. But while more constructivist,
open-ended approaches to LOs are possible (Kennedy, 2011) in practice, these often confront
a major dilemma where, “On one hand, students need guidance about what they are expected
to learn and what is emphasised in assessment. On the other hand, a fundamental assumption
in the constructivist paradigm is that what students learn is based on their own learning
activities.” (Havnes & Prøitz, 2016, p. 211). This again highlights the crucial role that emerges
for the overlaps between the degree of clarity or specificity demanded in LOs, and the way they
are related to assessment measurement. The implications of different approaches to specifying
and assessing LOs are next discussed in relation to students’ approaches to learning.

**Students’ role, motivations, and study habits**

There is little empirical research into if and how students use learning outcomes of the sorts
developed in European HEIs today. Brooks et al. (2014) explored students’ perceptions and use
of LOs, finding confusion and mixed reactions as to their potential to support or enhance
learning. However, there is considerable research on the way students’ approaches to learning
are shaped by the way they perceive their learning environment, their motivation and how they
anticipate assessment practices, which may clarify they LOs can influence students. Entwistle
(2005) points out that motivation is a key influence on how students approach and conduct their
studies, and relates to how far they pursue more instrumental or intrinsic approaches to learning.
Evidence from educational psychology and typologies of learning styles shown that students’
perceptions of HE, approaches to learning, and the kinds of learning outcomes they focus on
are related (Trigwell & Prosser, 1991). Students decide how to approach their studies based on
their perceptions of the learning context and expectations on them (Prosser & Trigwell et al.,
Bigg’s CA approach is intended to develop learning environments that foster greater engagement and deep learning, as these lead to measurable improvement in learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). However, the setting out of intended LOs has a somewhat ambiguous status here. Does it facilitate engagement via clarity (Biggs, 1996) or do LOs, as stated expectations of what is to be learnt promote an ‘acquisition’ model of knowledge and consumerist orientation that fosters passive approaches (Hussey & Smith, 2010) deserve consideration? The way LOs describe and define what learning requires from students, and what they can expect to get from it, is therefore likely to shape how they approach their course. If students perceive the teaching context only expects or requires a surface approach they will probably adopt that (Entwistle, 2009). Students focusing on instrumental outcomes perform less well in certain higher functions than those motivated by more intrinsic or deep factors, such as interest in their subject (Biggs, 1993; Adcroft, 2010; Pintrich, 2000). Patterns of student motivations and the way we can understand student’s role in HE appears to have changed over time. In the last three decades motivations such as ‘intellectual discovery’, a ‘desire for knowledge’ and ‘enthusiasm’ have eroded while views of HE as “a means towards some end, rather than being valuable in its own right” have increased (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) suggest that consumerism and marketisation may be re-shaping academic identity, teaching and curriculum practices, and student identities in ways that unintentionally promote passive or instrumental learning. Tomlinson (2017) suggests that while consumerist ideas are widespread, there is little evidence that students identifying as consumers powerfully informs their approaches to learning or HE more generally. Biesta’s (2009) notion of ‘learnification’ presents a stronger argument that we are witnessing the hollowing out of teachers’ roles, relationships to knowledge and a wider commodification in education; this ignores the purpose and values of education, while chasing efficient learning through tools such as LOs.

SCL is discussed in detail in Publication 4, and initially seems to be an example of an approach to learning which uses LOs in a way which embodies more constructivist and open notions about learning, and which promotes a much more active, agentic role for students. However, Scott (2011) points out that while student-centered approaches to learning imply a greater role for the student voice, a shift of power towards the students away from teachers, this may be hard to reconciled with SCL approaches which rely on pre-defined learning outcomes and assessment methods. Lea et al. (2003) suggest that SCL approaches are undermined by a lack of clarity about what they involve, an unwillingness to resource and implement them thoroughly, and so an incoherence in the way they are applied. In particular, the pre-specification of LOs creates problems in how this can leave room for students to steer their own learning process, pursue their own outcomes, or perform LOs in creative or novel ways. Biggs (1996) discusses the issue of assessing unintended as well as intended learning outcomes through the following exchange:

“Teacher: How many diamonds have you got?
Student: I don’t have any diamonds.
Teacher: Then you fail!
Student: But you didn’t ask me about my jade!
Conclusion: Learners amass treasure not just diamonds.” (Biggs, 1996, p. 352).

Again, the specific ways in which LOs are used to describe and make course more transparent to students, and their links to assessment, appear to be inter-twined and crucial in determining the ultimate influence of LOs on students. If students get the impression that only the stated learning outcomes will be assessed, in fairly direct ways, they will likely focus on simply performing or demonstrating this type of learning (Scott, 2011). There is some prior research investigating the varied ways in which LOs might influence students approaches to learning and assessment. Torrance (2007) considered the moves towards criterion referenced assessment and competence-based assessment in post-compulsory UK education, noting the efforts to develop transparency about the intended learning outcomes and criteria for assessing them. He argues this led to assessment procedures and practices dominating the learning experience. While this form of transparency helped more learners stay on and complete their qualifications, this came at the cost of a narrowing learning and the learning experience (Torrance, 2007). Balloo et al. (2018) challenge the idea that instrumentalism and narrowing is an inevitable result of greater transparency. They argue that the key is how being ‘explicit’ is interpreted and practiced, and that efforts to enhance transparency must proceed in ways which explicitly take account of differing conceptions of learning, to ensure responsibility is shared out between students and teachers as intended. They suggest a transformative approach to learning, promoting student ownership and autonomy can be supported by LOs, by involving students in discussions that serve to clarify assessment criteria and ensure students and teachers develop a shared conception of learning. They suggest this avoids the pitfalls of transactional approaches, or implicit approaches where students struggle to make sense of criteria. There are major challenges in reconciling LO approaches with notions of learning that emphasize creativity and the unexpected, and which allow students a more active role in steering their own learning. LOs might have the potential to enhance students’ learning and motivation by making expectations and requirements more explicit, but this risks encouraging instrumental or shallow learning. Previous evidence suggests that LO’s influence may be powerfully divergent, depending on the kind of learning ideas and approaches they are linked to (constructivist, behaviourist, intrinsic, or instrumental) and the way they are related to wider teaching, learning and assessment practices.

LO’s adaptability and fit with disciplinary variety
A final area of debate about LO’s influence on teaching and learning is how they accommodate and interact with disciplinary differences and structures. Harvey (2000) argues that higher education is increasingly characterised by instrumental learning, where the value of disciplinary structures, identities, and structures for knowledge are undermined, and there is an increasing focus on knowledge values on the basis of its external applicability in work or employability. LOs have been presented as a further challenge to disciplinary distinctiveness and status along
these lines, and academics have questioned the theory and basis for LOs, and resisted their introduction (Bennett et al., 1999). It also seems likely that LOs may be shaped or translated as they are implemented in diverse disciplinary settings. Previous research suggests that common LOs may be understood very differently by academics in various disciplines (Barrie, 2004) as well as applied differently in traditional, disciplinary-bounded courses in comparison to more vocationally-oriented ones (Dahlgren et al., 2008). When the nature of disciplinary differences is considered in terms of academic identities, as ‘ways of thinking and practising’ in HE learning, the tendency to varied interpretations and forms of LOs is unsurprising (James, 2005). This sense of disciplines as defining communities with shared, specific notions of what learning is also problematises the notion of precisely defined learning outcomes as a source of clarity for students, as they need to be sufficiently expert in a wider field to make sense of such descriptions (Entwistle, 2005).

A further issue that might drive subject differences in the application and reaction to LOs is the extent to which knowledge can be broken down as discrete outcomes. Qualities such as critical thinking and more esoteric aspects of learning may be hard to reconcile with more rigid application of LOs (Ecclestone, 1999). The potential identification and measurement of generic LOs is sometimes offered as an advantage offered by LO approaches, but again previous work suggests this interest in generic LOs is likely to be difficult to implement. Identifying common LOs that can be measured and compared across all HE subjects has proven challenging. Karlsen’s review (2011) looked at common LOs and assessment methods and finds little basis for assumptions that these are culture- or subject-neutral. Similarly, links between measures of generic LOs (key competencies) and educational assessments like grades are unstable (Karlsen, 2011), raising questions about their validity or the contribution of LOs as indicators of HE’s impact on students. Measurement is discussed more in the later sections. Subject differences may also influence how well LOs related to generic skills can be integrated into HE, as previous analyses found significant variations by subject area in students’ performance on typical skills assessment (Badcock et al., 2010).

Enhanced oversight, accountability, and new ways of measuring learning
Alongside these diverse ways in which LOs might change how HE is planned, taught and how learners behave, LOs have also been argued to have a significant role to play in managerial functions (Hussey and Smith, 2003, 2008; Proitz, 2010). Pre-specified outcomes have been portrayed as one of many New Public Management (NPM) approaches used to steer HE (Deem, 1998). Perhaps the most heated debate about LO’s potential in steering and management relates to the search for new measures or indicators of educational outcome, success, or quality. In part this has been driven by on-going problems with existing ways of assessing and comparing what HE intuitions, courses, and students do. University rankings have been criticised as limited and misleading in the information they offer about overall quality of institutions in general and teaching quality in particular (Hazelkorn, 2014; Boulton, 2011). The Bologna process has made great strides in establishing equivalent units of educational outcomes, but this has not led to
consistent ways to assess or measure outputs. If anything, it has increased the pressure to find measures. Huber (2012) points out that “A key problem in the establishment of the EHEA is to make both the performance of students and institutions comparable even if they originally were declared and designed to be incommensurable” (p. 212). The drift in the EHEA’s mission is increasing the pressure for measurements of learning outcomes, leading to greater demand for measures and comparison. Indeed, it is no new observation to suggest that any reasonably standardised form of data in education is seized on as the basis for new indicators (Cave, Hanney & Henkel, 1997).

At the same time as LOs are becoming a widely recognised unit or form to describe learning, there is a powerful sense that we must find more robust, valid, and meaningful ways to assess the quality of teaching and learning, in ways that allow comparison and more informed choices by students (Coates & Mahat, 2014). However, previous attempts to more directly assess and measure students’ learning outcomes tend to be problematic. Trudy Banta has observed that numerous attempts to develop standardised tests of HE students’ skills have failed to succeed as measures that can say anything about the effectiveness of HE institutions (Banta, 2010). She concludes that any interest in measuring what learning happens during university (as opposed to the abilities of incoming students) requires close-up comparison of students’ work, such electronic portfolios (Banta, 2007). There is also evidence to suggest that identifying subject or national-context neutral LOs will be difficult: significant variations by subject area are found in students’ performance on common generic skills assessment (Badcock et al., 2010) and significant variations in performance across ‘generic’ graduate skills are found in diverse national settings and disciplines (Sweetman et al., 2014). The Ahelo study attempted to develop approaches to assessing outcomes based on the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). However, CLA, while widely used over many years, has been the subject of sustained critique and questioning. Arum and Roksa’s (2011) analysis of undergraduates’ CLA results, before and after a two-year period at college, found nearly half showed no improvement (or performed worse) on key skills such as critical thinking and writing. Douglass, Thomson, and Zhao (2012) argue that learning outcomes are being pursued around the world as a way to judge the value and contribution of universities, through a ‘learning outcomes race’, leading to the development of new, often complex indicators, and complex, costly, and unwieldy processes. They also note that the effort to measure LOs creates tension between the governments’ interest in new accountability applications, and universities’ interest in data for self-improvement (Douglass et al., 2012). This leads towards the frequent concern and criticisms, “that learning outcomes have been hijacked by managers of education for use as a performance indicator” and that, if this is so, they cannot retain use in pedagogic applications (Hussey & Smith, 2008, p. 107). Certainly, this role for LOs focused on making HE more measurable, comparable and potentially easier to manage and steer seems to invoke a very different variety of transparency than those expressed in relation to empowering students above. Transparency, while widely promoted as a central aim in HE, has also been argued to be potentially counter-productive as the promise
of orderly, explicit ways of mapping and defining learning often falls short in practice (Allais, 2003) and attempts to enact transparency and explicit outcomes have implications for which groups gain and lose power in deciding what is to be learnt and what learning has value (Cort, 2010). There is a risk then, that while LOs are hoped to provide more robust, valid, defensible, and meaningful ways to measure learning and quality, this focus may illustrate that they are being ‘misappropriated’ from any potentially meaningful role in teaching and learning, to serve managerial purposes, or act as auditing devices (Hussy & Smith, 2002). Certainly, it seems claims that LOs are a neutral way to pursue effectiveness should be handled with scepticism: their focus on effectiveness and pre-specification itself expresses a strong instrumental view of learning, side-stepping questions about what outcomes are desirable and why (Biesta, 2009).

2.7 LO implementation in specific national HE systems and settings

Over the time that this thesis has been developed a body of knowledge has started to emerge that sheds light on how LOs play out in a range of comparative, national, and institutional case studies. These are summarised here briefly, to give a sense of the contemporary status of what we know about the enactment or implementation of LOs in higher education around Europe. Many of these studies position their relevance in similar terms to this thesis, in addressing the ‘gap’ in evidence for the impact of LOs on the ground or on teaching and learning, and this thesis is presented as contributing to this accumulating body of research.

Lassnigg (2012) considered the role of LOs in Austrian education governance, defining LOs as a multi-level instrument used in potentially differing ways in education and training and in policymaking. Lassnigg concluded LOs had the potential to shape practice and pedagogy, but that there was little evidence as yet of this happening. Essentially, he saw little evidence to support either critical warnings or positive expectations regarding LO’s pedagogical implementation and influence, due to their thin application and their appearing to be a relatively weak governance tool. In 2014, Sin considered LOs in England, Portugal, and Denmark. She suggested LOs were getting ‘lost in translation’ due to being understood and used in varied ways across the national cases, and also due to LOs having little relevance for students, despite their being premised in these countries as a way of promoting student-centred approaches. Ursin (2014) describes two institutional examples to illustrate how Finnish HEIs are adapting to LOs as a part of competence-based curricula, and alongside new, more standardised QA processes. They suggest that departments are reluctant to change and retain their distinctiveness despite pressure to harmonise their evaluation systems and procedures. Traditional research-intensive universities have a different approach to curriculum work and learning outcomes than universities of applied sciences, which generally have clearer links to vocational areas. Brooks et al. (2014) explored English students’ perceptions and use of LOs, finding confusion and mixed reactions to their potential to support or enhance learning. While it is clear that LOs have or are being built into England’s formal system architecture, through qualification frameworks and increasingly through national quality assurance systems, their use and impact within university degree programmes is varied and limited as yet. Brooks et al. (2014) also start from
the observation that, considering the claims made about LO’s role in changing how students learn, there has been little research into if or how students use them. Based on survey and focus groups at one UK institution, they argue that most students think LOs are useful, although they cannot always clarify what is expected of them to demonstrate the outcomes stated, and some students feel they fragment or restrict them. Hadjianastasis (2017) also looked at the UK experience with LOs, noting that, despite LOs having been thoroughly in place in HE since 2007, there remains little “evidence from the ground” to support the idea they have successfully been adopted. Focusing on their use by teachers and students, via an in-depth case study of a single institution, she identifies that they tend to be seen as a format for summarising the content of courses, or what she describes as ‘granularisation tools’ (p. 2261).

Various publications drawing on the HELO data describe the Norwegian experience of LOs in detail. Caspersen and Frølich (2015) compare the way academic leaders perceive purposes for LO’s introduction and how they are applied in a range of HE disciplinary or professional areas. They suggest academic leaders interpret LOs in diverse ways, as potential solutions to diverse challenges faced by their field or area, but that they are used across cases as a ‘managerial symbol’ offering new opportunities to intervene and negotiate about teaching quality. Michelsen et al. (2017) compare how engineering, humanities, and medical programmes in Norway have responded to LOs, arguing these show LOs shaped by local conditions and the professional and disciplinary groups that led to them being understood as enacting slightly distinct functions in line with specific needs. Another HELO publication, including the comparative English-cases, focused on LOs as management tools (Bleiklie, Frølich, Sweetman & Henkel, 2017) concluding their most developed role as management tools thus far is to provide more concrete administrative information, and that the changes they have brought have had a greater impact on the Norwegian cases than the English ones. They suggest LOs are ambiguous tools, shaped by complex overlaps of organisational and institutional logics and disciplinary/professional habitats. Overall, the publications from the HELO project emphasise the way LOs have been implemented in ways that underlines their ambiguity so far (Caspersen, Frølich & Muller, 2017) and the potential that this will hinder their ongoing implementation or usefulness, despite having proved useful in facilitating initial acceptance and development (Caspersen & Frølich, 2017).

2.8 Patterns in the literature: LOs as messy, ambiguous and contested

This review has sought to provide historical context to LOs as an educational reform and clarify how knowledge of the issue has taken shape within various bodies of research and debate (Montuori, 2005). It has attempted to ‘drill down’ from discussions about LO’s official role and intended applications, to consider mechanisms, processes, or assumptions that may be critical in explaining their interpretation and influence within degree programme practices. This analysis of the literature highlights several issues. The first is that the LO idea studied here as a ‘policy object’ in the current EU agenda, is neither very new nor novel; version of outcomes-
based planning, assessment, and comparison have been attempted, and often proven influential, over many periods and settings. Second, at the time this project was initiated, there was little evidence about the influence of LOs within institutions or programmes. Research on implementation had focused on their formal uptake, usually as part of EQF alignment. This left claims that LOs could have radical implications for practice (positive or negative) lacking evidence, and mechanisms that might connect broad LO reforms with changes in behaviours, priorities, or practices unexplored. Third, a range of conceptual and practical challenges in LO reforms is clear in this analysis; indeed, the nature of these challenges is a topic in its own right. Adam (2008) notes that reservations about the adoption of learning outcomes approaches centre on “two main concerns: (i) basic conceptual/philosophical objections and (ii) practical/technical objections” (2004, p. 7). Priestly (2016) identifies three areas of concern: philosophical concerns relating to democratic or empowerment ideals, conceptual or definitional issues about the form and level of detail LOs should involve, and enactment or implementation issues. Ecclestone (1999) points out that LOs are subject to “Persistent epistemological and technical ‘quagmires’” (p. 36). This section concludes by focusing on some of these controversies and quagmires. This is informed by Alvesson and Sandberg’s (2013) suggestion that, instead of only looking for ‘gaps’ in empirical knowledge about a topic, we also foreground and problematise assumptions or contradictions in bodies of knowledge. I argue we should approach LO enactment as a relatively ‘wicked’ problem, characterised by complexity and ambiguity (Trowler, 2012). This informs the way LOs are approached and positioned in the analytic framework and the selection and development theoretical lenses (Section 3).

**LOs as a panacea: A simple, technical reform serving many ends**

The view of LOs as a relatively simple, but far-reaching intervention is well illustrated by Coates and Mahat (2014) where they outline an array of rationales for LO’s use in HE, including the role LOs can play in identifying outputs from HE more accurately, providing robust and valid metrics for institutional quality, new ways to identify good practice and performance, a way to meet and match the need for new skills and knowledge in the labour market, and greater transparency about what HE institutions do for students and society. Certainly, the expected functions and role of LOs have proliferated within EU reforms along similar lines, with LO’s influence on teaching and learning practices coming to the fore (Sin, 2012), their association with student centred reforms (Adam, 2008) and growing interest in them as a tool to assess and ensure quality (Havnes & Prøitz, 2016). Despite this sprawl in roles and applications, there is a sense, at least within policy circles, that there remains a reasonably consistent, common understanding of learning outcomes, or at least a dominant version (Adam, 2004, p. 5; Prøitz, 2010; Prøitz, 2014) that allows us to credibly consider them as one reform agenda. Coates and Mahat (2014) conclude that despite the ‘flux’ in implementation, they retain “more similarity than difference. Conceptually and linguistically, it is possible to mark out an area of reasonably shared understanding” (p. 17). There is argued to be a ‘common sense’ or generally accepted version of them, based on similar definitions in policy regarding their use in HE under current
EU processes (Kennedy et al., 2007). However, James (2005) notes that while LOs are often presented as an appealingly simple concept, which ‘do what it says on the can’, this does not reflect how implementation plays out. LO’s panacea aspirations seem to set off a range of implementation processes with considerable potential for contradictions, mess and tension.

**Contradictory rationales, tendencies, and practices**

The view we can consider and approach LOs as one, stable ‘thing’ or policy therefore seems problematic. Their contradictory nature seems almost built into their role in international HE ‘architecture’: at the same time as they are presented as a tool for harmonisation, great emphasis is put on their flexibility and adaptability, accommodating a range of levels and types of learning, or different national and disciplinary settings. This seems to ignore the challenges identified by literature describing the complex international and national ‘translation’ processes that can undermine standardisation-focused reforms, and literature suggesting LOs are shaped by disciplinary knowledge and structures. LO’s potential influence on teaching and learning also seems highly ambiguous, even contradictory. They can, and have, been put into practice in divergent ways, enacting differing ideas about the type of learning pursued, and the way LOs are expected to be linked to measurement. LOs can offer ways of empowering students and fostering deep learning (Biggs, 1998; Balloo et al., 2018) or encouraging compliance and instrumentalism (Torrance, 2007). Many proponents warn misguided or narrow implementation may be counter-productive, encouraging fragmentation or instrumentalism (e.g. Allan, 1996; Biggs, 1996).

**The persistent problems of specificity and measurement**

Some of the battle lines between LO proponents and critics have remained remarkably consistent from the 1960s on, essentially offering competing visions of LO as either: a) reasonably concrete, measurable, and predictable; or b) more open and flexible to accommodate a range of learning in HE, but hard or impossible to measure and predict. Despite the extensive work done to develop LOs in technical, neutral, flexible forms for curricula and course planning, and the many ways in which LOs are linked to progressive or constructivist varieties of learning in theory, there are real questions about how far LOs can accommodate unexpected or unusual learning (Biesta, 2010; Havnes & Prøitz, 2016). The desirability and feasibility of measuring LO’s is a source of huge tension in conceptual and methodological debates. The hope that LOs can provide a basis for more valid and concrete measures of learning, and so enhance transparency and accountability, is a long-running one; achieving it relies on overcoming major challenges illustrated by earlier attempts to assess students’ performance on pre-defined LOs.

**2.9 A wicked issue? Contrasting ways to handle LO’s mess and divergence**

LOs powerful tendencies for complexity, ambiguity, sprawl, and a lack of boundaries support a view of them as a wicked issue in education: one characterised by complexity, mess, ambiguity, tension, and which tends to either be ill-defined or understood in diverging ways, by different groups (Trowler, 2012). Certainly, these problematised themes suggest LOs present
conceptual challenges as an object for investigation, and a challenging set of ideas to implement in practice. I also wish to highlight a tendency in much of the existing literature on LOs which seems to reflect attempts to handle these challenges and contradictions in one of two ways, to stabilise LOs and reduce their ‘wickidity’. One is to treat LOs as if they are one great reform wave, a relatively simple, technical change that nonetheless triggers system transformation. This transformation may be presented as supporting student-centred learning and a democratisation of HE (Adam, 2004; 2008) or the hollowing out of teaching practices, narrowing of content and promotion of consumerist notions of learning (Biesta, 2009). Essentially this view of LOs assumes a ‘common sense’, single meaning can be found, and implementing LOs as a common format or unit for learning will tend to set off a cascade of reforms, spanning a range of practices, leading to a broad outcomes-orientation. This also seems to assume that the versions and applications of LOs cascading through the system will somehow be linked, carry the same logic and create reasonably compatible structures and practices. The other tendency involves approaching the LOs topic as if it represents a range of ‘discrete tools’ or interventions, acting on bounded areas of practice or actors, that can and should be studied discretely. LOs are examined as pedagogic tools, policy tools, as a way to re-structure curricula, encourage constructive alignment, or measure generic learning directly. This approach can provide detailed, empirical accounts of LO’s influence in a range of areas, and sheds light on mechanisms that might explain their influence. Again, this perspective can be framed positively, highlighting LO’s adaptability and relevance for multiple applications (Coates & Mahat, 2014), or negatively, suggesting the LO term is overstretched to the point of incoherence or deceptiveness (Hussey & Smith, 2008). While both of these ways of positioning, studying and explaining LOs capture important qualities about previous and ongoing reforms, I suggest in the closing section that do not capture the findings developed across the publications, or help grapple with the ambiguities and contradictions described. An alternative set of metaphors is set out, as a way of gaining new perspectives on LOs nature, the dynamics evident around their enactment so far, and their likely influence. This involves looking as LOs in terms of metaphorical pluralism (Sfard, 1998) and multiplicity (Mol and Law, 2002) to focus less on ‘quagmires’ related to what LOs are, or which version of them is most real and instead focusing on how the metaphors we apply to them engage with, explain and draw implications about their contested nature and influence. The findings from the four publications that make up this thesis, and some the themes and tensions problematised in this section, are re-examined in section 6 through three linked metaphors. These position LOs as a broad ‘net’ of policy discourses and structures, as a range of distributed ‘knots’ of purposeful, orderly enactment, and a range of local ‘tangles’ of varied, messy enactment; these metaphors are argued to convey how qualities of the broader LO agenda (similar to ‘one great wave’) and more local versions (similar to ‘discrete tools’) shape and constrain one another, and how the dynamics between these forms of LOs may be key to understand their popularity, success and limitations.
3 Analytic framework: key perspectives & theoretical lenses

This section describes how project’s central issues are positioned, related to one another, and key assumptions made. It sets out the type of research process pursued, and the analytical constructs and perspectives that frame the project and are put to work in the analysis. It addresses the following questions: How are LOs positioned as an object of enquiry within a particular set of epistemological assumptions about the nature of policy and ontological assumptions about the nature of the social world? How is the process of implementation or enactment, particularly at the degree level, understood in relation to broader ideas and policy agendas focused on LOs? How does the study go about pursuing macro and micro features of policy implementation and influence?

The development of this analytic framework involved a challenge to find an appropriate balance between closure and precision and the need to retain flexibility and breadth appropriate to the messy nature of the central concept. The choices made were informed by Law’s discussion of mess in social science, and his warning that “simple, clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess” (Law, 2004, p. 2) While it was important to resist a simple, singular definition of LOs, the aim was to develop analytical tools that made it possible to work within the mess and complexity, to identify and build clear and convincing insights and arguments. A range of specific theories were drawn on in the publications – supporting their focus on various features of LOs and offering different perspectives on the empirical material. This is one reason the project tended to use theory more as a ‘lens’ or ‘sensitising concept’, rather than a source of strong predictions or assumptions. While using theory as a lens is often a feature in grounded theory, there was no intention to develop a theory-free stance. The project builds on epistemological assumptions that consider social concepts as necessarily formed by and built through implicit or explicit theory. The approach taken is abductive, building on previous research and theories, but accepting this inevitably limit and shapes how these complex issues are understood, and the conclusions drawn.

3.1 Conceptualising policy, policy enactment & LOs as a ‘policy object’

“Most policies can be considered ramshackle, compromise hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice” (Ball, 1998, p. 126).

A discursive perspective on policy

The dissertation takes up a discursive perspective on the nature of policy, and the way policy ideas or rhetoric interact with practices and behaviours. Policy and policy enactment is assumed to require us to attend to social constructed phenomena such as values and norms. However, this can be reconciled with a critical realist stance that assumes that policy processes can be embedded in structures and practices that constrain agency and interpretations. Social practices
are assumed to ‘reflect’ and be shaped by particular discourses, and these practices in turn have the potential to ‘fashion and transform’ discourses (Durnova et al., 2016). Discursive practices “are therefore always understood reflexively as interactions, in which many elements are played out at once: an exchange of content, but also of intentions, identities, positions, and power…” (Durnova et al., p. 44). As well as underlining the on-going feedback between policy as discourse and policy as practice, this approach is often seen as a critique of policy analysis that takes an apparently rationalist or non-normative stance (Fischer, 2003). This perspective also foregrounds the tendency for a range of discourses to operate at any given time, as they “compete to define problems, offer solutions, and discredit alternatives, and these are not only issues of language or rhetoric”. Instead of trying to work around or obscure value-dimensions, or inconsistency and tension, discursive approaches tend to see these as inherent parts of policy and assume revealing values is part of the aim of analysis (Fischer, 2003). The territory and issues that LOs operate in relation to are characterised by a reasonably high degree of ‘wickidity’, as Trowler describes it: “wicked issues are ill-understood, there are many causal levels, there is no clear ‘stopping point’ where a solution has been reached and solutions are not clearly right or wrong” (Trowler, 2012). As the literature review illustrated, LOs are presented as potential responses to diverse challenges have been linked to an array of potential applications. Attempts to drastically simplify LOs, avoid the complexity around their conceptual status and implementation, or ignore normative aspects of their uses, would likely to lead to particularly limited or misleading analyses of enactment. Fischer (2003) argues that over-simplification and approaching policy in a non-normative way, tends to overlook significant factors or fundamentally misinterpret behaviours, and is a particularly inappropriate way to investigate policy issues characterised by the unexpected and emergent, or a high degree of complexity and instability.

Policy enactment as a particular perspective on implementation
Various types of policy implementation research take a different stance regarding how far they focus on and handle top-down and bottom-up perspectives on policy implementation processes, and take account of or balance structure and agency (Sabatier, 2005; Gornitzka, et al., 2005; Ball, 1994; Trowler, 2002; Gornitzka, Kogan & Amaral, 2005). This project positions itself in relation to a particular type of policy implementation work focused on the ground-level enactment of policy ideas, variously referred to as ‘policy enactment research’ (Ball, Magurie & Braun, 2012), ’policy in practice’ (Trowler, 1998), or ‘situated practice’ research (Saunders et al., 2011; Saunders & Sin, 2015). The wider terrain of implementation studies varies considerably, especially between those coming from a more political perspective, and those from a professional practice perspective. The central concerns of policy implementation studies are if and why a reform agenda translates into real change, and how far and why expectations and results correspond (Gornitzka, Kogan & Amaral, 2005). In pursuing these concerns there are significant differences in the assumptions made about the implementation process, notably how much it should be seen as a top-down, linear, and rational process, or how much there is
room for ‘bottom-up’ re-making or transformation of policy. Cerych and Sabatier’s (1986) systematic, comparative framework provided an influential tool for HE policy implementation across national cases, which focused on the key conditions for policy success. This typifies a ‘top-down’ and rational perspective, which has since been criticised as over-estimating the influence of specific policies and neglecting overlapping influences, such as similarities between international and national agendas, or shifts in surrounding conditions (Sabatier, 2005). More complex perspectives on implementation recognise the potential for more dynamics where multiple sources of policy influence each other over multiple levels (El-Khawas, 2005) and actors at various levels play a role in resisting or changing policy implementation. These ideas challenged the view of international policy spreading by ‘diffusion’ across sites, with more active versions of implementation involving multiple processes of translation (Czarniawska, 2014). Implementation research approaches such as ‘backwards mapping’ sought to reverse top-down assumptions by studying the real-life environments into which policy was implemented, considering actors’ goals, motivations, and contextual features (Gornitzka, Kyvik & Stensaker, 2005).

This project focuses on enactment as a way of exploring the relationship between high-level policy ideas, and ‘ground level’ practice, and as a way of assessing the role LOs are playing in contemporary HE. However, it retains an interest in high-level policy and its potential success in driving efforts towards convergence. Various terms have been used to capture the potential relationship between high-level, international policy and the practices they intend to shape. Neave (2007) points out that formal convergence in certain international HE structures and policies has been an unreliable predictor of what is implemented at the state and sub-state levels; he refers to this as a gap between two ‘spheres of political action’ of policy intentions and the chalk face of teaching and learning (2002, 2007). Veiga and Neave (2015) similarly describe the Bologna processes in terms of the ‘pays politique’, what Bologna ‘ought to be’ based on legislative principles and the official political discourse that carries it, and the ‘pays réel’, what Bologna is in terms of teaching, learning, and the curriculum. This supports their interest in the influence policy intentions have on dynamics and practices within institutions and their argument that more attention should be paid to how Bologna is interpreted by the pays réel. There are parallels here with Ball’s analysis of educational trends and ideologies in terms of ‘global policy scripts’ and policy’s move into practice as a ‘text’ is transformed into a ‘discourse’ (1993). Again, these metaphors capture different levels or roles for policy which are not exclusive. Ball intends us to look at policy as having the potential to act both as a ‘text’ in seeking to shape action and ideas, typically as it is expressed by policy actors, but also as a ‘discourse’, in the ways that policy ‘texts’ are then transformed, adapted, and reformulated via more messy processes of meaning-making and use. The potential for learning outcomes to influence practices is here considered both in terms of potential changes in rules, regulations, structures and in their discursive and normative influence on ideas, arguments, and ideologies.
While more traditional implementation studies aim to investigate how accurately or successfully a policy is implemented, with a common aim of developing theories of implementation that can be applied more broadly, they may neglect questions about unintended impacts and policies acting differently across settings and sites. This is a point made well by Ball et al. (2013) where they argue that international policy reforms often should be understood “not as failures of implementation” but “mutations” and that policy ideas can have effects that are important, but also gradual and nuanced rather than immediately obvious or easily classifiable as a good or bad shift. LO’s apparent potential (according to proponents and critics) to be a force for significant changes and potentially the convergence of structures, behaviours, or ideas, needs to be considered empirically and in a way that can capture unintended influences.

**Learning outcomes as a ‘policy object’**

Having noted that the nature and potential use of LOs is contested and complex, and established the discursive approach taken to the nature of policy and policy change, it is necessary to identify a way LOs can be stabilised as a feature within these complex policy processes and approached empirically. This involves clarifying what LOs are approached as. Are they a concept? A policy tool? A discursive act? A curricula structure? A pedagogic intervention? Some of the publications approach the analysis of LOs more in terms of their role as a policy tool (Publication 1) or as a pedagogic intervention (Publication 4). However, overall the project approached LOs as a ‘policy object’ set out by Sin (2014) as a way of designating and investigating specific areas of policy embedded in wider agendas or reforms. In this case LOs are understood as an area of policy we can investigate as a ‘discrete preoccupation’ embedded in the wider Bologna agenda and reforms. Sin (2014) notes that the Bologna process involves many actions and instruments (including ECTS, degree frameworks and LOs) whose meaning, expression, and influence are linked through overlapping policy agendas but also inevitably linked through enactment. Understanding the enactment of any one of these ‘policy objects’ requires us to consider both the ways actors understand the object, and how these understandings ‘translate into enactment’ (Sin, 2014, p. 436). Sin refers to this as processes of ‘ontology’ and ‘enacted ontology’, where the construction of meaning and enactment are considered mutually constitutive. This is very much in line with Ball’s work on the dual nature of policy (1994). Actors tasked with putting a policy into practice inevitably ‘enact’ the version of the policy they have constructed within a given setting, which may bear more or less resemblance to the policy expressed by those initiating it.

**Enactment as a dynamic process within an implementation staircase**

The project seeks empirical evidence of how the LO policy object is interpreted and practiced within degree programmes. It takes a comparative perspective that assumes local (national and departmental) contexts are important, not just at the level where LO’s intended influence is supposed to materialise, but also potential sites of re-shaping or adapting these ideas into practice. The implementation staircase developed by Saunders and Reynolds (1987) and elaborated on by Trowler (2002) and Saunders and Sin (2015) provides a model that clarifies
how the levels in this study are assumed to be related, and how policy objects might play out over levels and sites, and so offers an overarching framework for this study (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Overarching analytic framework: policy implementation as ontology construction and enactment over various levels of the policy staircase (Saunders, 2006; Sin, 2015).*

While some may see the ‘staircase’ as implying hierarchy and top-down logic (Kogan, 2005), this is not the case. The staircase emphasises that policy may be constructed and put to work on many levels, and that many forms of that policy may exist on different levels at any one time. Saunders and Sin (2015) note that, “The implementation staircase metaphor suggests the importance of constructing the experience of policy from the points of view of the main stakeholders within a policy environment. Further, it suggests these points of view may well differ significantly, and it is the task of analysis to ‘construct’ these differences” rather than focus too much on identifying dominant patterns or tendencies. This fits well with the wider interest in exploring areas of ambiguity or contradiction around LOs. The staircase also embodies some of the discursive assumptions about the nature of policy, assuming it is ‘made’ through practice, “as practitioners go about their daily business, whether they are aware of it or not, as recurrent practices, sets of attitudes and assumptions are realized in specific contexts of practice” (Trowler, 2002, p. 3). The potential for actors to receive and adapt policy at each level may lead to adaptation and many varied, situated meanings; these constructions are expected to reflect the priorities, pressures, and interests that characterise actors’ positions or their ‘level’ (Reynolds and Saunders, 1987, p. 44). At each level, then, there is a potential for policy to be received, reinterpreted, and transmitted up or down the levels. In principle, the power to re-shape the policy object and its implementation can be found at any level, with power seen in terms of complex relationships across various levels, not simply in terms of hierarchic power.
(Reynolds and Saunders, 1987, p. 44). The metaphor of a policy implementation staircase helps clarify how the case studies and interviews are analysed in relation to national contexts and the broader EU-level LO policy object. Figure 2 summarises this staircase model, combined with the policy object perspective of ontology construction and enactment. The policy object notion clarifies that LOs are the object that is ‘followed’ and investigated through these various levels and that investigating its enactment is assumed to required attending to dual processes of meaning making (ontology) and changes in behaviour and practices (enacted ontology).

3.2 Mapping the territory: a heuristic for potential LO enactments

As discussed in Section 2, attempts to specify LOs as any one thing often end in the conclusion that there is more ideological diversity than can be contained in a single definition (Martin, 2014). A variety of contrasting definitions of LOs can be found and evolving inventories have been investigated by Adam (2004, 2008) and Prøitz (2010). Learning outcomes have been argued to be poorly defined as a conceptual/theoretical object and operate with a great variety of potential features and functions. A prescriptive operationalisation of LOs could undermine the project’s aims by ruling out too much ambiguity or capturing a limited impression of their use and influence. Nonetheless, as the central concept of this research they need to be made ‘researchable’. The project built on previous work that attempted to describe the range of theoretical terrain LOs are related to and diverse uses set out for them. Prøitz (2010) provides a wide-ranging review of the roots and conceptual range of learning outcomes and develops a model for LOs based on two ‘axes of variation’. Prøitz grounds one spectrum of potential LO types in Gagné and Eisner’s discussions about the LO concept, with these theorists representing behaviourist (Gagné) varieties and pragmatist and social constructivist varieties (Eisner). A second spectrum relates to conceptualisations of the purpose of LOs: on the one hand as tools for educational and instructional planning, curriculum development, and teaching and learning, and on the other tools focused on measuring effectiveness and accountability. These axes developed by Prøitz (2010) align well with the policy object perspective, providing a more concrete way of mapping both how LOs are interpreted or constructed in terms of their meaning and nature, and the way they are used in practice. One of the key challenges identified in previous LO reforms is the expectation they can link up and describe the outcomes of learning over a range of levels, or in ways which are much more fine-grained and specific, or broad, aggregated summaries of learning over many years. Hussey and Smith (2008) argue that the use of the term ‘LOs’ to refer to their application on such a range of levels is misleading and conceals significant conceptual and practical differences. They distinguish and describe LOs nature and role on three levels: specific teaching events, modules or courses and whole degree programmes. These levels of enactment have been combined into Prøitz’s (2010) model, to provide a heuristic or ‘map’ of the likely LO terrain. This three-axes model allows for potential variety, while providing some order and a focusing analytical tools during data collection and initial analysis (Figure 3).
3.3 **Reflections on the theoretical perspectives and framework**

This analysis seeks to clarify how LOs are enacted as they are interpreted and put into practice within degree programmes. It is also interested in identifying what might explain any variations or similarities identified, and how these relate to contested claims about the nature and influence of LOs. It is also important to note that while this framework expresses assumptions that underpin and guide the project, it is not the intention to offer strong, causal predictions about what will be found. The analytical framework developed around policy in general, and LOs as a specific object, is based on approaches to policy that resist the choice between assuming enactment to be largely a matter of agency or structure, or assuming policy to act as either a contested discourse or stable text (Trowler, 2002). The value of this discursive view of policy and the theoretical heuristics is particularly clear in Publication 3, where leaders, teachers, and students’ interpretations and uses of LOs were investigated in detail. The variety of understandings identified, along with two tendencies in the overall interpretation of LOs, was possible because the operationalisation of learning outcomes considered a wide range of potential applications and focused attention on the tension between applications of LOs which require more concrete and measurable forms, with LOs potential to convey more esoteric or intangible aspects of learning. This is a good example of the way the theories used shape the results and analysis generated (Ashwin, 2012).

Kogan’s arguments that we should take the general failure of attempts to find robust predictive ‘laws’ in policy implementation, or robustly generalise from one policy implementation process to another, as a warning against thinking we can identify and assess the factors that determine
policy success or failure, influence, or irrelevance (2005). While this questions the
generalisability of theories of implementation, and their predictive power, it is still important
to consider how theories about the nature of implementation can guide our analysis, by focusing
our attention on different levels or aspects involved, and by providing terms and metaphors
which may help convey and clarify patterns identified. These kinds of theoretical contribution
are made by the three-axes model, policy object approach and implementation staircase model.
In practice, these have been used more as theoretical tools and lenses, than as a single
overarching framework that determines the project’s approach or predicts what will be found.
The epistemological underpinnings of the project, the commitment to ‘mess’ and avoiding pre-
defining this contested policy object, make this an appropriate course in this case. While it
would have been possible to build a neater analytical framework around this work, the use of
lenses that were compatible but provided somewhat separate is supported by those such as Ball
(1995) who suggests that when we seek to problematise or see an issue differently, we may not
want theory that is too neat, but which allows us to shift between perspectives and so ‘think
otherwise’. A more focused, theoretical defined approach to LOs as an object, and feature
within policy implantation, might have yielded different, potentially deeper results. The breadth
here is important in this case in leaving room for the central object to emerge as ‘being’ and
‘doing’ varied things, but it of curse involves trade-offs and builds in potential weaknesses.
Finally, these lenses are not used unreflectively. The closing section of this discussion text
returns to questions about how these both guided and limited the analysis and understandings
developed. These theoretical lenses are challenged and re-arranged, and, in particular, the
implementation staircase is argued to be inadequate to capture qualities of complexity and
multiplicity in LO enactment.
4. Research design and methods

4.1. Epistemological & ontological assumptions

The project is founded on critical realist assumptions. This acknowledges that the world exists independently of us, but this does not mean it can be directly measured or understood; indeed, the aspects of the world we engage with in educational or policy research are typically complex and characterized by unpredictability and emergence (Sayer, 2000). Our ability to understand and create meaning about the world (epistemology) is inevitably partial and indirect, and various strategies and constructs are accepted as necessary to mediate between the aspect of the ‘real’ world from which the data are derived, and the way knowledge about phenomena are developed. These foundations, and the complex nature of the topic, are reasons for developing and applying several theoretical perspectives or tools. It was accepted that the understandings generated would be imprecise and imperfect and that no one approach could account for all aspects of reality relevant here (Ashwin, 2012). The critical realist perspective also underpins some of the assumptions about policy and policy enactment, which considers structure and agency as mutually-constitutive, and implementation not as a simple, linear top-down or bottom-up processes but one involving more complex, multi-level processes or meaning construction and enactment. Systems theories, or systemic perspectives also informed this project approach and assumptions. One way this is evident is the desire to move between and consider links and dynamics between macro and micro levels. Systems approaches to complex issues typically take multi-level approaches and attempt to relate national traditions/contexts to individual actions and an interest in dynamic mechanisms; in doing this they also avoid the potential structure-versus-agency tension in potential explanations of change, as these are seen as “two sides of the same coin” (Bunge, 2000). Both the implementation staircase and the policy ‘object’ approach imply that LOs are a feature that only functions or makes sense when seen in relation to a wider system of meaning and action. These foundations and assumptions are important to clarify as they are significant in explaining and justifying the inferences developed. Going beyond descriptions of the difference and similarities across cases and developing arguments that engage in certain types of causation and (bounded) generalisation are not only appropriate but important to pursue in these perspectives.

4.2. Research design: multi-level comparative case study

This section clarifies the nature and rationale for the comparison developed in this dissertation. The central rationale for taking a comparative approach to LOs is their status as a convergence-focused tool, whose influence is highly contested. As described in Section 2, the European ‘script’ on learning outcomes presents them as a tool that implies and promotes harmonisation of systems and outcomes; this builds in an assumption that LOs are robust enough to withstand implementation in varied contexts, and still result in broadly similar practices. At the same time, LOs are promoted in terms of their great flexibility and adaptability (Adam, 2008). A comparative approach is particularly well suited to scrutiny of these kinds of claims, and engage with the problematic assumptions and contradictions highlighted at the end of section 2.
The empirical evidence gathered is primarily based on interviews across eight degree-programme cases, spanning two countries and two disciplinary areas. The interviews focused on respondents’ understandings and enactments of LOs, but also investigated which factors or conditions were perceived as shaping LO enactment. The interviews were supplemented with documentary sources related to the national policymaking and HE system contexts (Publications 1 and 2), and the role of quality assurance agencies and regulations (Publication 2). This provided further insights about potential ways national environments can shape LO enactments. The choice of a case study approach relates to their allowing the simultaneous exploration of a phenomena in depth, and the ‘real life’ context surrounding it (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) stresses the advantage of simultaneous collection of information about the phenomena (LOs) and the relevant contexts (university departments and national HE and policy settings) as a way to investigate the potentially complex interaction and causal links between the two. This interest in scrutinising LO’s enactments in relation to local or national contextual features is important in clarifying the particular type of comparative policy research pursued here. Comparative educational research is a diverse and divided field. On one hand are large scale, multi-country, cross-national data comparative approaches, which have become hugely influential on educational policy-making (Carvalho, 2009; Eckert, 2008). Organisations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCO, and the World Bank produce regular reports and rankings based on comparative data and measures of educational systems. The Ahelo study mentioned in Section 2 is an example of how this kind of comparative education research can approached and investigate LOs. These broad-brush comparisons often assume or imply that educational systems are similar enough to support this kind of comparison as a valid way of assessing educational quality or comparing the effectiveness of various educational approaches, and have been critiqued as neglect issues of power, ideology, or differing national priorities (Marginson & Mollis, 2001; Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). Partly in response to the extent and influence of this type of educational comparison, critical comparative research typically foregrounds issues of power and ideology, subjects globalisation and homogenisation to more empirical scrutiny, and considers ways in which ‘the local’ may digest or translate global ideas (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). This thesis was developed along critical comparative lines, problematising some of the assumptions in the LO agenda or gaps in the empirical evidence for their influence, and focusing on evidence of local enactment within specific settings.

The influence of large-scale, cross-country comparative education data, and the attendant neglect of the various levels that play a role in shaping educational policy and practices, has been argued to account for increasing interest in multi-level comparison of educational systems and changes (Bray & Thomas, 1995). Palmberger and Gingrich (2014) note that comparison is a particularly valuable approach to investigating issues related to international coordination and the spread and exchange of ideas, and suggest that the heightened sense of globalisation encouraged the resurgence in comparative methods, specifically comparative case studies, as a
way to explore these issues. Bray and Thomas critique national-level, multi-country comparisons for tending to imply much more homogeneity within countries than is accurate, and for neglecting factors such as size, geography, population, political organisation, and educational system features as potential influences on educational or policy outcomes. They argue that multi-level approaches can offer a more ‘balanced understanding...comprehensive and possibly more accurate presentation of the phenomena’ studied (Bray & Thomas, 1995:484) by attempting to account for at least some of the various levels and contextual differences involved. This study, while focusing on the national and departmental levels, positions LOs as a feature of the contemporary EU agenda, mediated through national policy contexts and HE system features and traditions. It aims to develop contextually informed analysis and comparisons and consider the potential for multi-level processes or factors to shape the LO enactments described by respondents. Comparison between the diverse cases is intended to support and enhance analysis, to ‘sharpen awareness of underlying forces’ that might explain the nature and variations in a specific policy’s enactment (Bray & Thomas, 1995, p. 488).

4.3. Introducing the two national contexts

The selection of Norway and England allows a comparison of national settings where formal HE structures are well aligned, including EQF-aligned national curricula, but where there is considerable variation in HE system traditions and contemporary policy agendas. The two countries also have contrasting experiences of the introduction of outcome-based qualification frameworks (Helgøy & Homme, 2013). This section provides background about these national settings, supporting the comparison of LO enactment between them. Publication 1 discusses these HE systems’ characteristics, traditions and history of LO implementation in more detail. It is important to note that interview data was collected in 2014, and these contexts have seen significant changes since then. This section addresses events up to the time of data collection.

The overview of the two national systems was supported by several detailed, comparative HE policy studies. Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie, and Henkel’s (2006) Transforming Higher Education, provides an in-depth comparative analysis of HE reforms in Sweden, Norway, and England from the 1970s onwards, tracing waves of reforms related to massification, internationalisation, and governance, as New Public Management (NPM) worked through these systems. This comparison drew on statistics, document analysis, and interviews with policy makers, leaders, and academics, and considered the reform process on the state, institution, and individual level. Kogan et al.’s (2006) work helped to identify Norway and England as fruitful cases for HE policy comparison, based on their contrasting reform traditions and HE system features (see Table 1). In 2009, Paradeise, Reale, Bleiklie and Ferlie published a substantial comparative analysis of seven national cases of changes in higher education, training and research. They also took a historical approach (the previous 30 years) to a period often considered to have seen western European HE systems experience similar shifts towards more autonomy, accountability, and a stronger managerial approach. The authors argue there was a clear rise in managerial approaches to university reform in this period, with considerable international similarity in
policy rationales and tools. Magalhães, Veiga, Ribeiro, and Santiago (2013) summarise key findings from the comparative project ‘TRUE’, looking at the interaction between European Union policies and national HE systems in England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Switzerland. This work aimed to clarify “the extent to which the European governance approach is developing discourses and practices in the field of higher education likely to produce convergence of policies” (p. 96). They stress the need to explore ‘coordination’ between the national and international level, rather than work from top-down or bottom-up assumptions. Also published in 2013, Helgøy and Homme’s comparative analysis of the implementation of the EQF in England, Norway, and Germany provides important background. They consider implementation in terms of shifts in values and changes in structures or practices, drawing on ‘norm diffusion’ as well as traditional institutional and political perspectives. Helgøy and Homme’s (2013) work is draw on heavily in Publication 1. Together, these studies provide evidence of important patterns of similarity and difference between the national contexts relevant to the way LO’s introduction and HE reforms linked to LOs (such as national qualification frameworks) have played out.

**Summarising key patterns of similarity and difference in the two national contexts**
One of the reasons that England and Norway an interesting basis for comparison is their contrasts in reform traditions, HE financing, and the ways LO approaches arrived in HE. They also arguably provide two cases which represent outliers from continential European HE norms, particularly in their relationship to EU reforms and financing of the systems. The similarities and contrast between these national cases are summarised here and in Table 1. Both nations are formally well aligned with Bologna processes, and through this have developed similar HE structures, monitoring systems and credit systems (Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie, & Henkel, 2006). These alignments have been strengthened by the application of the European Qualification Framework. However, the way HE reforms have played out in the two systems differs. Bleiklie (2000) described differences between the two HE reform traditions as follows: “English reforms were comparatively centralised, radical, and relied more on tougher measures in order to discipline non-compliant institutions. Once introduced, the policy was pursued rather consistently. This pattern illustrates the confrontational style . . . what we may call a heroic style of policy making… The Norwegian reforms, however, were less radical… They evolved gradually in a value-structure driven process with considerable local variation as to how the reforms were implemented” (p.86). To some extent, this reflected differences in the way HE institutions were related to the state, with the traditionally high-autonomy English HEIs being limited by powerful steering and funding reforms through the 1990s, and Norwegian HEIs, officially more closely linked to the state, continuing to experience and exert considerable academic autonomy, thereby maintaining a tendency towards negotiated, incrementalist reforms (Kogan et al., 2006). The Norwegian tendency to policy has been questioned in recent years, however, not least as the rapid uptake of an EQF-aligned framework runs counter to this tradition (Helgøy & Homme 2013). Indeed, despite Norway’s traditional process orientation in
educational planning and evaluation, there has been a rapid development of outcome-based qualification frameworks (Skedsmo, 2011; Prøitz, 2015). There has been some challenge and resistance by actors within Norwegian universities to outcome-based approaches, related to the need to retain room for disciplinary differences and academic judgement, but these concerns have not had much influence on how fully or quickly outcome-based frameworks were established (Handal et al., 2014). In contrast, LOs have been in place in UK qualification frameworks, and present in various aspects of the ‘skills agenda’ in higher and further education, well before their role in the Bologna process (Washer, 2007) again marking out England’s experience as something of a European outlier (Helgøy & Homme, 2013).

Table 1: Summarising key HE system characteristics in Norway & England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Norway</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LO introduction &amp; experience so far (Helgøy &amp; Homme, 2013; Prøitz, 2014)</td>
<td>- ahead of European learning outcome experience: Outcome-based learning established in lower levels and VET, and via strong skills agenda over the last 20 years</td>
<td>- experience of LOs later and more sudden: Rapid uptake of the EQF and LO approaches since 2005. - ‘Kunnskapslof’ or Knowledge Reform marked shift from input to outcome orientations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to EU Higher ed. policy (esp. EQF alignment) (Helgøy &amp; Homme 2013)</td>
<td>- ‘Ahead of’ EU reforms (little change needed) - Low awareness of EU role - EU not perceived as major driver of changes (Sin, 2012) - Distant/sceptical attitude despite EU membership (Sin, 2014)</td>
<td>- High awareness of internationalization agenda as driver in HE reform. - Formally distant (non-EU) BUT increasingly seen as a ‘good pupil’ and keen reformer in certain areas. (Bleiklie, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National HE reform traditions / level of centralisation (Kogan et al. 2006)</td>
<td>- ‘Heroic’ and centrally driven, even if influence often mediated through ‘buffer’ / ‘intermediary’ agencies (for funding, quality) - “Strong hand” - High institutional autonomy, Low academic autonomy (in teaching/learning)</td>
<td>- Incremental and negotiated, major reforms seen as more “technical” and pragmatic/modernizing - “Steady hand” - Low institutional autonomy, High academic autonomy (in teaching/learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student position in HE system (Eurydice, 2015)</td>
<td>- Heavy consumer-orientation with high fees (up to £9000 p/year) - Challenging graduate labour market</td>
<td>- Weaker consumer orientation, with free higher education - Robust graduate labour market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance practices and traditions</td>
<td>Strong role of QA in driving change – suggestions more directive aspects of QA process being softened, but at same time peer review being reduced</td>
<td>More recent introduction than England. Initial negotiated and holistic approach now shifting to much stronger focus on output-based evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of/extent of HE institutional autonomy</td>
<td>High institutional autonomy, low academic autonomy (in teaching learning)</td>
<td>Low institutional autonomy, high academic autonomy (in teaching learning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
English HE is widely perceived to demonstrate a lower level of engagement and awareness of
the Bologna process than is typical across Europe (Sin, 2012) while Norway, despite not being
a full EU member, has proved to be a ‘good student’ in following EU reforms promptly and
thoroughly (Bleiklie, 2009). A final area of divergence from European norms is the way HE is
financed in each nation. Norway is one of a small number of countries where HE remains
essentially free, with no fees at public institutions (these provide the vast majority of HE courses)
and with generous loans and grants available (Eurydice, 2015). Tuition fees were introduced in
English HE in 1998 and the ‘cap’ on maximum fees has been lifted by subsequent governments
(Wilkins et al., 2013). By 2012, the maximum fee for undergraduate degrees was £9000; while
expected to be an upper limit among a range of fees, in practice most institutions charge the full
amount (Wilkins et al., 2013). As fees have risen, the funding provided to English HEIs from
the state has significantly reduced, and 2010’s spending review saw university teaching budgets
cut by 40% (by 2014) and teaching grants withdrawn from all non-laboratory-based disciplines
(Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2010).

Common trends: NPM or neoliberal reforms as a ‘common grammar’ for HE governance

While describing various ways these national contexts differ, previous comparative work on
national responses to EU reforms also identifies trends towards similar policy making tools and
approaches over the last 20-30 years. In 2009, Paradeise et al. concluded that the countries
investigated share a repertoire of policy instruments, although the UK continued to diverge
from continental Europe in how reforms played out. In all national cases they identified a shift
towards managerial approaches to steering and accountability, with variety in the extent and
methods used to pursue these reforms, and the UK the most determined and radical reformer.
Norway was relatively late, slow moving and incremental, with this attributed to massification
causing less acute resource pressures in Norway due to relatively stable state funding (Paradeise
et al., 2009). Magalhães and Amaral (2009) also describe increasing similarities in steering and
governance in European HE, including the rise of LOs. They argue these changes depict HE as
a lever for economic and social change, based on the interests of external stakeholders. This
apparent growing prioritisation of external stakeholders’ views about what HE should do, focus
on and teach, comes at the expense of traditional HE constituencies such as students and
academic staff. Magalhães et al. (2013) take up similar comparative arguments and suggested
that several areas of reform, such as evaluation and funding policy, demonstrate the emergence
of a ‘common grammar’ for European governance in HE. This involves similar legitimising
discourses in the way HE ‘problems’ are framed, and regarding the central mission of HE. They
stress the significant role played by QA agencies and guidelines as a channel for EU influence
and suggest the development of this ‘grammar’ influences national practices without direct rule-
making or simple normative pressure, but through ‘the governance of governance’ (Magalhães
et al., 2013). Many of the pressures and shifts towards common policy approaches and values
described in these comparative studies are related to New Public management (NPM) and neo-
liberal reforms. Olssen and Peters (2005) provide a summary of these ideologies, as terms which capture shifts from the 1980s and 1990s onwards in the way universities’ missions are justified, organised, and reformed; NPM and neo-liberal reforms essentially challenge traditional notions of the university as a professionally-led site for open intellectual exploration and development, and demand a focus on performative demonstration of value in terms of the knowledge economy, economic growth, and measurable outputs. Helgøy and Homme (2015) suggest it can be unhelpful to see such NPM trends in an undifferentiated way when comparing countries, as these reform ideas have interacted with distinct national traditions and systems over time. They argue the implementation of the EQF shows that room remains room for national interpretation, translation processes and path-dependence, and that this is especially evident in the Norwegian and English cases (Helgøy and Homme, 2015, p. 14). There is little doubt that across Europe, even in ‘outlier’ cases like Norway and England, NPM and neo-liberal reforms ideas have a powerful influence promoting similar ideas about the value and appropriate working of HE.

4.4. Selection of degree programme cases & recruitment of interviewees

The selection of degree-programme cases aims to build in consistency between the two countries and a clear disciplinary contrast. All four institutions included were research-intensive, well-ranked universities. Previous research suggests that common LOs may be understood very differently by academics in various disciplines (Barrie, 2004) as well as applied differently in traditional, disciplinary-bounded courses in comparison to more vocationally-oriented ones (Dahlgren et al., 2008). Becher and Trowler’s description of disciplinary tribes (1989) defines contrasts between pure, soft subject areas (humanities) and applied, hard areas (in this case STEM) and this guides the selection of contrasting areas here. The use of qualitative data gathered via semi-structured interviews offered a way to investigate the perceptions and practices described by those tasked with putting LOs into practice. If LOs influence practices and experiences within university degree programmes, these are the people that should know about it. Similarly, the interest in how LOs were ‘constructed’ or develop a more stable meaning, clearly required a qualitative approach.

The interviews span eight degree-programme cases (see Table 2). In total, 45 interviews with staff and students were conducted and analysed.

Table 2: Overview of degree programme cases

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Norwegian cases</th>
<th>Inst 1</th>
<th>STEM (applied)</th>
<th>Humanities (lang/regional)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inst 2</td>
<td>STEM (pure)</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English cases</td>
<td>Inst 3</td>
<td>STEM (pure)</td>
<td>Humanities (lang/regional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inst 4</td>
<td>STEM (applied)</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All cases are traditional, highly ranked universities (two universities in each country) with ‘pairs’ of similar degree programmes selected across the national cases. This selection was intended to complement the broader national comparison, by providing settings with clear similarities and
differences. For each case a range of interviews were conducted, typically with the head of department or head of a programme (referred to in quotes as ‘leaders’), teaching and learning committee members, lecturer(s) on the programme and students. Interviews were largely one-to-one, although a handful of respondents (mostly students) took part in pair or small group interviews.

4.5. Links to the HELO project & additional data sources

The Norwegian fieldwork and data collection in the cases was developed and conducted in cooperation with the ‘HELO project’, a Norwegian Research Council funded project which investigated how learning outcomes are understood, interpreted, and practiced in higher education contexts in Norway. As a member of the HELO project team, I helped develop the materials for, and conducted some of the Norwegian interviews, but was not present at all of them. Norwegian fieldwork was conducted in summer 2013. I conducted the English interviews in autumn 2013. I also conducted three additional student interviews in autumn 2015, as the student sample for two of the Norwegian cases was incomplete. By using the same discussion guide and an aligned approach to sampling cases and respondents in England, this provided a set of cases suitable for comparison, and gave me to access a larger set of interviews than I could have gathered independently. The wide-ranging interests of the HELO project (spanning LO’s role in management, teaching, and learning) provided room to interrogate and relate the interview data to varied theoretical perspectives. Members of the HELO team considered this data from political science, organisation studies, and pedagogic perspectives. While the overall research interests and data set were shared with the HELO project, this dissertation work has involved a process of establishing a distinctive analytical framework and publications which share a central topic but vary in approach and positioning. Two of the three publications based on HELO interview data are sole author pieces, which reflect the approach to policy enactment set out in section 3 quite directly. Publication 1 is also based on HELO data, and was written with several HELO team members, uniting expertise from political science, historical and HE policy perspectives and. This positions LOs more as a ‘policy tool’ than a ‘policy object’ as described in this analytical framework. A final publication (Publication 2) developed in response to the initial comparative analysis of HELO interviews, which drew attention to the role of QA agencies in LO’s introduction and enactment. While the main empirical material for the publications was the comparative interview data, additional sources were drawn on in two publications. In Publication 1, comparative data from the ‘TRUE project’ supported the development of a short historical and policy analysis of the two countries’ experience of LO approaches within HE. In Publication 2, LO’s shifting role in quality assurance was investigated via a comparison of documentation, reports, guidelines, and academic publications from a small set of country and regional cases. The publications describe the approaches taken in more detail.

4.6. Approach to analysis

Detailed notes and transcriptions from the interviews were analysed in Nvivo software. A range of code frames were developed and used in analysing the data. First of all, a series of codes
closely based on the discussion guide allowed an initial, broad-brush comparison across the cases. Emergent codes and sub-codes were added as analysis proceeded to respond to areas of particular emphasis or discord. Later, more theoretically guided codes, and codes related to the ‘problematised’ LO tendencies identified in Section 2 were developed. One example of this was the development of codes relating to changes in student/teacher roles relevant to student-centred learning. In this way, the analysis was guided by the theoretical and analytical lenses, but not limited to it. The analyses reflect an abductive approach, using theoretical perspectives as a starting point, but also seeking patterns in the data that extend or go beyond the theories or perspectives used at first, to respond to challenges, questions, or address aspects of the data in different ways. The practical steps involved in this have much in common with the processes described by Maxwell and Chmiel (2013) where theory is used to aid what are necessarily incomplete and limited explorations of complex topics; the theory help to describe, explain, and clarify, while being recognised to offer a limited account and to be only one among a range of valid potential theories. In putting the theories to work I moved between analysis based on the discussion guide, the three-axes model, or the comparative cases, and more open-ended and creative code building and refining, which was driven by efforts to match these emerging codes to patterns of similarity or difference in the data. I also analysed the data to look for potential explanations and to develop and challenge potential causal inferences about the enactment process and its drivers (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2013, refer to this as contiguity). This is one of the ways that potential arguments about the cases of certain types of LO enactment have been developed, along with respondents’ own perceptions and claims about drivers of change. The perspective on causation that Maxwell and Chmiel set out clarifies that the inferences drawn from this type of analysis do not claim to evidence a causal relationship in the positivist sense, but reflect attempts to connect the data, and codes, in ways that inform the processes described by respondents. The use of several theoretical lenses also supported what Boote & Biele (2005) refer to as generativity. This “involves the ability to build on the scholarship and research of those who have come before us. Generativity grants our work integrity and sophistication. To be useful and meaningful, education research must be cumulative; it must build on and learn from prior research and scholarship on the topic” (1999, p. 162–163). The messy, complicated nature of problems in education, such as LOs, and the divided bodies of evidence and discussion around them, suggest generativity may be especially valuable in this case.

4.7. Limitations

There are several limitations to the data, likely impact on the results and analysis. Collaborating with the HELO project allowed me access to a higher number, and greater range of interviews than would otherwise have been possible. However, while I was involved in the interview guide design, and it fits well with my project, it is broader than the scope of my project. Furthermore, the collection of Norwegian data involved several interviewers. Their exact approach and the detail they provided in interview notes varied. This made the Norwegian data less consistent than the English data in some areas, presenting some challenges for the comparative work. I
conducted supplementary interviews for two Norwegian cases to address the lower number of student interviews. However, the Norwegian data had fewer direct quotes available, and the greater variety in interviewer approach and transcripts may have limited the scope for a more fine-grained, disciplinary comparison across the countries.

Another important limitation to note was the recruitment strategy. Heads of Department were generally contacted first, to gain their agreement to participate. Information from websites was used to identify likely candidates for the other interviews (e.g. those heavily involved in teaching or those in teaching and learning roles) and those in certain roles were requested, but Heads of Department often had a say in who was selected. It is possible interviews over-represent those in agreement with leaders or more likely to give a positive report of LO reforms. Similarly, students were recruited via departments and in the Norwegian data were typically student ‘class representatives’. Students were sought in the English cases who also had taken on a representative role, and again those involved are unlikely to be typical, and may be more engaged than the average student with questions about how courses are organised, run and how much this meets students’ hopes and expectations. It is also important to note that the types of institutions included were deliberately narrow – the way LOs are received and employed in less research-intensive universities, or in vocational education, is likely to differ significantly. In hindsight, it is also clear a wider range of material could and should have been collected. Local documentary sources about LOs, course plans, and guidance notes on how to implement LOs would have been rich additional sources. As Norwegian data collection was underway so early in the project, this broader approach to data collection was identified too late to put into practice.

4.8. Validity and the types of inferences developed

The project does not aim at a definitive causal explanation or assume predictable processes in policy implementation, based on a handful of causal factors. It aims to provide empirically-based descriptions and analysis regarding how LOs are enacted in contemporary HE, and develop arguments related to possible explanations for patterns identified. Furthermore, it aims to develop findings in the form of convincing descriptions, metaphors and mechanisms that provide useful insights for those working with LOs; that clarify how actors can enact LOs in different ways, to serve different ends, and which highlight aspects of their meaning or influence that were previously unclear or confused. In this way the project aspires to be critical (in seeking to problematise and question the official intentions of LO approaches) but also useful (in aspiring to develop analysis which are credible, clarifying, and support better informed decision making by those involved in LO implementation).

The design provides a way to investigate how a broad, European level idea is interpreted and influencing the ‘ground level’ of HE systems, by looking for evidence of it’s interpretation and use in the day-to-day work of leaders, teachers, and students in degree programmes. In interpreting the meaning and relevance of the results generated, I build on a wide-ranging theoretical elaboration of the LO concept, and I offer contextually grounded discussion to
support the descriptions and conclusions I present. One limitation of using interviews is that reported behaviour and perceived influence are used to infer what enactment of LOs is like in practice. Teaching practices have not been observed, and other types of evidence of the policy object ‘in action’, such as an analysis of curricula plans, have not been included. The central challenge in developing analysis and arguments, however, has been the nature of LOs as a ‘policy object’ that is so vague and so closely tied to multiple other agendas and changes. Any attempt to isolate LO’s ‘meaning’ is difficult, and attempts to provide ‘closure’ regarding how far inferences developed apply into the future or across a wide range of sites, is a matter of judgement. However, such limitations are inevitable in this kind of topic. In terms of examples of the kinds of inference developed, in several papers I suggest ways the LO concept appears to influence teaching practices or management; in doing this I draw on types of causal or explanatory inference founded in and limited by the critical realist foundations of the project. The questions of and how LOs influence teaching, learning, and management practices in HE, is one that resists any neat, linear causality. Whatever is happening, it is unlikely that we can anticipate the boundaries and scope of LO’s influence, or isolate it from wider, related practices, processes, and changes. Instead, attempts are made to gather data that supports contextually-informed suggestions about the likely processes and mechanisms involved, based on respondents’ reports of LOs being constructed and put to work in ways they perceive to be significant ways (Maxwell, 2004). This analysis was guided by respondents’ own proffered explanations and inferences about where LOs have ‘come from’, the drivers for certain forms or applications of them, and perceptions of immediate and emerging influence. These analyses represent a form of local casualty being developed through the analysis; tentative claims made about why the construction of LOs found across cases sometimes differ, and are sometimes similar. The results and analysis were constructed with the intention of offering ‘provisional stabilities’ (Saunders et al., 2005); inferences far short of causal claims or generalisable principles, but more than simple aggregation and description of patterns in the data. The potential applicability and relevance of these inferences are discussed in much more tentative and hypothesis sketching terms. These kinds of findings credibility and relevance are accepted to be limited both over time and over differing contexts. The comparative nature of the project supports such contextually-informed interpretations, because the two national systems offer differences in the features and factors around LOs which can be unpacked in some detail (see Publication 1 and section 4.3). In later papers I was also able to relate findings to a small number of similar studies conducted in other countries in recent years, discussing how and why results were similar and different. In this way, I seek to provide a coherent and convincing account of how the specific ‘policy object’ of LOs is playing out in practice, based on the experiences of the individuals tasked with putting it into practice; this provides a relatively good (though still highly imperfect) position from which to speculate and infer about LO’s influence or impact.
4.9. Ethical issues

Most guidelines for social science researchers stress the ethical issues of informed consent, confidentiality and accuracy (Christians, 2011, p. 65-66). This project follows formal requirements in these areas but is also informed by broader principles. The guidelines from the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2006) discuss codified practices, but also general ethics of science, with roots in ‘common sense’ morality (NESH, 2006). The approach to meeting formal requirements regarding interviews is discussed first before describing these broader ethical considerations. The project was registered with the Norwegian Data protection agency (NSD) in a process that involved confirming all respondents would receive written information about the project’s aims, scope, topics, and the right to withdraw at any time. While the issues discussed in interviews might not appear personal or sensitive, NESH (2006 p. 11) notes “being subject to observation and interpretation by others can be experienced as degrading” even without sensitive issues at stake. Asking respondents to describe their practice and views on teaching or learning may be quite personal, and interpretations of their comments, or comparisons to other opposing views, could be experienced as criticism. Conducting the interviews in departmental settings meant interviewees often discussed their colleagues, and this made anonymity in reporting particularly important. Respondents were referred to based on their broad role (leader, student, teacher), (anonymised) institution, and two broad disciplinary categories. However, to ensure comments were not only ‘formally’ anonymous but could not be linked to anyone, the transcription process involved removing or adjusting any information that could identify a respondent, for example descriptions of specific activities in courses, institutional practices or local areas. Interviews with students also raise some additional concerns. While all interviewees are adult (between 19 and 22 years old) students are less likely to have experience participating in research and more likely to feel a power asymmetry in an interview situation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 33).

The nature of LOs also underscores the importance of conducting research in a way that is open to differing views. Leaving room for, and actively probing for, varied attitudes towards and differing interpretations of learning outcomes was crucial, including making it possible for respondents to report confusion regarding LOs or minimal or noncommittal use of them. NESH (2006) stresses the importance of such openness and being explicit about selectivity and judgement throughout the project, particularly in the design stage. Standish (2002) also argues that ethical practice is not confined to how we gather the ‘data’ in qualitative research, but that “the ethical is there at the start in our actions and projects, and hence inevitably there at the start in research in education. It is not only there in the manner in which it is conducted, but in its aims and orientation” (p. 212). This challenged me to attend to and be clear about how I frame my questions, what assumptions I accept, and which aspects of LOs I problematise. I have attempted to be explicit about the choices made in theoretical and analytical perspectives, and the advantages and limitations that follow from these choices.
5. Summary of publications

This section provides a summary of the four publications included in this PhD. It clarifies how each article relates and contributes to the project’s overall aims and scope, as well as the range of approaches, analyses, and findings in each (see Table in appendix I). The articles address the same central topic of learning outcomes but span a range of ‘steps’ of the ‘implantation staircase’ (as illustrated in Figure 1, section 1). The articles and project were planned as a multi-level analysis, but also developed organically as the interview data was interrogated, and papers were developed with co-authors and in response to the editorial review processes. Together the articles enable an exploration of the contemporary relevance and status of LOs, and demonstrate the value of multi-level and cross-system comparison of international policy objects such as LOs. The articles also go beyond descriptions of how enactment of LOs is playing out in practice, to consider how LOs relate to other reform agendas, such as quality assurance and shifts in teaching practices related to student-centred learning.


This paper addresses research questions (RQs) 1 and 2. It draws on HELO interview data with leaders and teachers as well as data from the ‘TRUE project’, which compared several countries’ HE systems, steering and governance. It uses political science and comparative policy lenses to analyse the implementation of LOs in relation to national reform traditions, administrative characteristics, and HE system features. The article highlights a tendency in previous comparative HE policy research for ‘common’ international reforms to be ‘translated’ into practice in varied ways. Comparing LO’s arrival and implementation in these contrasting or outlier systems is argued to provide a compelling way to investigate if this tendency to translation applies in the case of LOs, and interrogate claims that LOs are flexible enough to accommodate diverse HE systems, but robust enough to be applied consistency enough to facilitate international HE standardisation and harmonisation.

The key policy perspectives drawn on are Schneider and Ingram’s five instrument types (authority, incentive, capacity, symbolic or learning tools) as well as instrumental and institutionalist explanations for the formation and success of a policy. The paper highlights the divergent assumptions of instrumental and institutional theories, and, while it favours institutional explanations (such as path dependency or policy appropriateness), it recognizes aspects of LO implementation which are better explained on instrumental terms. The paper also marks an attempt to unite insights on LOs from public administration and policy communities with research on LOs from pedagogic and educational communities; these bodies of knowledge have tended to be separate, and linking them up sheds light on how patterns of LO implementation in day-to-day practices might be linked to features of the national contexts.
The paper describes and contrasts the national contexts in some detail. Norway is presented as a moderate, strong-state ‘moderniser’, balancing state and market reforms, in contrast to England’s status as an arch ‘marketiser’, re-making HE along private sector lines. EU and Bologna processes, and New Public Management (NPM), are presented as powerful forces for convergence. However, while England has made extensive moves towards marketisation compared to most European countries, Norway has been a relatively late, but rapid, adopter of NPM ideas. Having set out these contrasting HE systems, the paper describes the ‘landing’ of LOs in each. LOs were part of English reforms well before the Bologna ‘version’. The form and principles of outcome-based education were therefore familiar, but were also unfavourably associated with employability and training-oriented reforms. The Norwegian educational system, in contrast, was heavily input-oriented until more recently, making LO approaches a more radical policy shift, but also one with little ‘baggage’ that was therefore treated with less scepticism than in England. The interviews illustrate how teachers’ and leaders’ perceptions of LO’s intended function reflect their settings and system histories. In England LOs were seen as tools for making graduate skills explicit and relevant to employment, as well as a way to respond to students as high fee-paying customers, through more detailed information about what they ‘get’ from a degree. In Norway, respondents were accepting of LOs as the next stage of on-going reforms for European alignment, but also as a tool to meet national concerns about teaching quality. LOs generated little controversy or resistance, despite marking a significant shift to unfamiliar outcome approaches and despite their acknowledged potential to create more scope for steering and oversight of traditionally ‘private’ teaching practices.

Despite these variations in how LOs ‘landed’ and were perceived in each country, intermediary bodies are argued to have counter-acted the potential for national translation or adaptation. The English quality assurance body, the QAA, progressed from requiring LOs as ‘minimum threshold standards’ to expecting LOs to be used throughout programme design, teaching and assessment. In Norway, the central admissions board required all degree programmes to adopt an LO format, while the quality assurance agency, NOKUT, built LOs into their evaluation standards. In this way, both cases illustrate a common NPM feature: intermediary bodies exerting a powerful influence to ensure policy instruments are implemented, and monitoring their application via oversight and control mechanisms. The authors therefore conclude that LOs developed from descriptive tools to something closer to indicator or evaluation instrument. The contrasting contexts led to differences in perceptions regarding what LOs are ‘about’ or ‘for’, more than differences in how they are used. Overall, there is less variety in LO practices than institutionalist perspectives would anticipate, and LO’s relative consistency is a contrast to previous comparative literature which focus the local adaptation of common EU policies.
Publication 2: Impact of assessment initiatives on quality assurance


This chapter responds to RQs 1 and 2. It featured within a book that brought together a range of institutional, disciplinary, and international cases illustrating the developing influence of LOs in HE. The chapter opens by sketching the rise of quality assurance (QA) in higher education from the late 80s on, and accompanying shifts from input- to output- or results-oriented approaches in policy and evaluation. It highlights the QA ‘mission creep’ from monitoring institutional performance to evaluating programme-level planning and activity. It notes there is scant evidence learning was improved by these QA trends (Stensaker, 2008). This has led to calls for new QA efforts and approaches, with a more tangible effect on HE; specifically, this involves calls for a shift from pursuing quality processes to more direct ways of assessing quality outcomes. The chapter poses two questions: Are we seeing a closer integration of external quality assurance processes and learning outcomes, in particular in ways mediated by various qualification frameworks? If so, what might the implications of this be? Addressing these questions is complicated due to LO’s varied definitions and uses. Furthermore, LOs and qualification frameworks often go beyond a format to describe what is (to be) learnt and start to specify how students should learn, often advocating the constructive alignment of aims, activities, and assessment. To establish some order and suggest likely relationships between LOs, types of assessment, and QA approaches, the paper presents a four-quadrant table, based on 1) the level of learning outcomes assessed (individual or institutional); and 2) how learning outcomes are understood (pre-defined or open-ended). Each quadrant contains features and evaluation criteria that would typify a particular ‘version’ of the QA-LO relationship. This table provides a heuristic to support the document analysis identify patterns in how QA agencies are approaching and using LOs, and to test out and possibly reject the assumptions it builds on.

The empirical analysis is based on documents regarding several QA bodies and areas: national QA bodies from the UK, the United States, and Australia, as well as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The documents provide information about these organisations’ aspirations and activities and QA bodies’ own publications are supplemented by academic literature regarding recent QA reforms. Summarising the conclusions for each regional or national case is not possible here, but together the cases demonstrate a clear, common tendency whereby LOs are positioned as a crucial tool to improve on previous QA approaches, in particular as a way to address demands for greater transparency and comparability. LOs role in QA is often linked to updated national qualification frameworks, as well as new federal structures and processes aimed at fostering consistency across entire HE systems (at the national or regional level). The analysis suggests QA organisations generally expect LOs to be applied as planning and descriptive tools, presenting this as a straightforward process, but also finds widespread evidence that embedding them in teaching or assessment practices is proving problematic. The QA agencies typically focus on advantages of LOs related
to constructive alignment but also demonstrate a preference for measurable, pre-defined outcomes, although other sources of QA information, such as institutional self-reports or samples of students’ work, remain ‘in the mix’. QA bodies continue to focus primarily on the institutional level, with various efforts to collect finer-grained data (samples of student work) or comparable data (student skill tests or surveys) which might facilitate QA assessment or comparison at the degree-programme level; again, these appear to be proving resource-intensive and methodologically problematic. While based on a small number of cases, and a ‘snapshot’ of QA activities, the analysis suggests three patterns. First, even where LOs are only used as ‘formal’ descriptors in national frameworks, considerable amounts of work are required to unpack them for use on various levels within HE institutions (e.g. whole degree-programme, courses). Second, the cases suggest an ‘upward’ shift taking place in QA processes, towards the regional (European) or federal levels (America and Australia). Third, there are widespread efforts to develop more direct, concrete measures of student performance based on LOs, but these are proving challenging to develop and standardise. Returning to the table of postulated LO/QA relationships, we suggest that instead of a clear shift in QA practices towards the pre-defined LOs / individual level assessment quadrant, the cases illustrate QA agencies striving to move in this direction, but having to retain a range of activities across all four quadrants so far, due to limited success in developing direct measures of student performance, or links between LOs and assessment.

The chapter draws a fairly pessimistic conclusion about LO’s potential to solve QA’s impact problem. LO approaches are likely to succumb to the same, persistent measurement challenges as exemplified in previous outcome-based reforms (such as student surveys and generic skills measures). The growing profile of LOs in QA, and QA organisations preference for more concrete, measurable forms of LOs is also argued to be problematic in terms of maintaining a balance between improvement and accountability functions in QA systems. The pursuit of measurable LOs fits better with accountability mechanisms, and is likely to encourage HE institutions to focus on compliance or gaming LOs as indicators, rather than engaging more broadly with ideas of constructive alignment or with complex processes involved in reviewing and improving teaching and learning that LOs can also be used in.

**Publication 3: Incompatible enactments of learning outcomes? Leader, teacher and student experiences of an ambiguous policy object.**


This paper relates to all four RQs. The empirical analysis involves the full range of degree-programme actor interviews (leaders, teachers, students), and a comparative analysis attempting to identify how actors construct and enact LOs in relation to the two national settings. Patterns of similarity and difference in the way LOs are interpreted and enacted, and actors’ views on LO’s role within broader trends and system features are related to one another, as a way of developing credible explanations for differences in enactment, and as the basis for a broader
assessment of LO’s trajectory and influence. The paper applies lenses from the over-arching analytic framework quite directly: the ‘policy object’ perspective (Sin, 2014), and the three axes of LO variation (Figure 3) based on Prøitz (2010) and Hussey and Smith (2010). Prøitz identified a tendency for two typical ‘versions’ of LOs to emerge in practice, with distinct types found among policy makers and teachers. This analysis finds similar opposing tendencies, described in terms of ‘process’ and ‘product’ LOs. An interpretation of how these versions develop is developed in relation to the comparative analysis of two countries, and a discussion of the dynamics that may contribute to this tendency. This dynamic involves forces shaping LOs in a ‘top-down’ way those adjusting LOs from the ‘bottom up’, as well as a process of LO enactment which is multi-stage and complex, involving several rounds of LO development, adjustment, and negotiation. Previous studies looking at LO implementation in selected national or institutional settings have suggested that inconsistency around LO’s use in practice, and students and teachers lack of a clear, consistent sense of LOs are, means they are unlikely to have a significant influence on HE. This is not supported here, as initial variety and vagueness seems likely to be contained and channelled over time, towards a more robust, consistent and influential form of LOs. The three-axes model and the policy object approach are demonstrated to offer an effective way of developing a systematic, in-depth analysis of LOs across diverse settings. They also support the development of arguments which go beyond the description of the kind of variation identified, to develop empirically-supported, potential explanations for the emergence of such tendencies and patterns. The findings are also discussed in relation to competing claims made for LOs potential influence on harmonisation, as the source of new forms of measurement, and as a way to change teaching, learning, or management practices within universities.

Publication 4: HELOs and student-centred learning – where’s the link?

This paper focuses on RQ3. There was less of a comparative emphasis in this publication, and instead the aim was to look at how the respondents across all cases interpret LOs as an influence on teaching and learning practices. Student-centred learning (SCL) is often put forward as an example of the kind of progressive changes LOs can support in HE, to improve educational quality and student learning. It offered a more specific lens through which to interrogate LO’s role in enhancing or modernising learning. The article opens by setting out common claims about LO’s potential to enhance teaching and learning, suggesting these typically relate to themes of transparency, alignment and student-centeredness, with the first two themes often positioned as overlapping with efforts to achieve SCL. Despite widespread claims that LOs and SCL are complementary, linked or mutually supportive, the paper problematises this assumption and argues it deserves empirical scrutiny. The article suggests there is a) little empirical evidence to support the link; b) the mechanisms that might link LOs and SCL are rarely described by proponents; and c) clarifying how they might be linked is complicated by LOs and SCL both being vaguely defined and contested terms. The interviews with students
and teachers provide an empirical basis to explore and interrogate potential links between SCL and LO approaches.

The article identifies a range of definitions of SCL, summarising key features of SCL aims and practices. These competing versions of SCL summarised in a table based around key questions: What is meant by learning? What practices/activities are involved? What roles are expected? What are the implications for power and choice? This table serves as bridge between contested ideas about what SCL is and should involve, and the kinds of SCL-type practices students or teachers might describe and pursue. The table provides an analytical tool to interrogate the interview material, going beyond explicit discussion of the term ‘SCL’ by respondents, and considering how teachers’ and students’ descriptions of changes in roles or practices that they ascribe to LOs might relate to SCL. For example: how LOs are thought to create shifts in teachers’ or students’ roles and responsibilities, encourage new approaches to teaching or learning, influence learning environments, or re-shape assessment. The argument put forward is that LO approaches influence course planning and teaching practice, but in ways which suggest an ambiguous relationship with SCL. Teachers and students describe positive influence of LOs: supporting clear, detailed communication about degree courses, what is expected of students, and what students learn beyond subject content. Teachers note LOs can be a helpful format for less experienced staff, and that the process of developing or updating LOs can provide a positive challenge to traditional teaching practices. However, LOs were also experienced a format that requires or encourages a higher degree of specificity and concreteness about what is expected from students and will be learnt than is always desirable. While clarity is perceived as helpful, excessive specification of LOs risks more complex or hard-to-express types of learning being left out from descriptions or assessments, and so the over-simplification or narrowing down of degree programmes. The issue of transparency, widely discussed as a positive feature which helps students engage with courses, is presented as something of a double-edged sword. Students’ individual variations in learning habits and interests, and the challenge of capturing the full range of learning involved in higher education, set inevitable limits on how much transparency is deemed possible or desirable. There was little evidence that LOs fundamentally re-shape teacher and student roles, or re-distribute power or decision-making between them. Indeed, teachers describe LOs more as a way to ‘make’ students work as intended, mostly via summative assessed activities, than as a way of empowering students to work independently. Teachers also do not see LOs as transferring more responsibility for learning to students or encouraging them to be more active. The most significant change in students’ role related to LOs was rather a concern among some teachers that LOs can encourage a more passive, consumerised role. The language of LOs, especially in the marketised environment in England, could encourage students to see learning as something they ‘receive’, rather than do. Students describe using LOs most to guide in-degree choices (reading course descriptions to choose modules/sub-courses) and sometimes as a support to assessment preparation – where LOs can help decide what areas to focus their effort on.
When teachers are asked which practices they think support high quality courses and learning, they focus on fostering engagement among students and more opportunities for feedback and formative assessment; achieving this was seen as challenging in terms of available resources and time, due to large class sizes, more varied student bodies, and a lack of contact and teaching time. Students’ views about positive learning experiences were relatively idiosyncratic, often based on a particular body of knowledge or teacher they found inspiring, or strong relationships built with teachers or a specific group of students. These positive experiences of learning invoked elements of ‘traditional’ teaching as much as ‘active’ or student-centred practices. Overall, respondents’ views on the practices that support good teaching and learning were weakly connected to SCL or LO ideas and practices. The table of key features of SCL highlighted issues of power and choice as crucial to some, but not all, versions of SCL. There was little sense from students or teachers that LOs give students more say in the shape, content, or processes within their degree. Students also express a desire to be guided and led, as much as to have choice. A ‘safe’ amount of choice involved feeling confident that ‘experts’ were structuring their programme to include the most important knowledge within their subject area, but that they still had some room to tailor their course based on interest or future plans, through optional courses or tracks. Power was rarely discussed in explicit terms, or linked to LOs and SCL. Some teachers suggested LOs could hand more power to leaders and managers, if LOs provide tools for oversight and comparison. The idea of LOs as a type of contract with students-as-consumers was occasionally suggested as one way students might gain power to challenge the quality of teaching or assessment results.

The article concludes that LOs and SCL both have limited purchase and potential to transform HE programmes or enhancing learning. While the ideas are familiar, they are unstable and vague, and may support or conflict with one another, depending on the specific ways they are interpreted and applied. LOs are perceived as having a ‘double-edged’ influence on teaching and learning, carrying potential benefits and risks. In terms of implications, it is suggested the policy-level focus on LOs or SCL as the key to enhanced teaching and learning may be misguided. It diverts attention from more basic, identifiable issues that teachers and students agree are critical to quality. The results also support the argument put forward by Ellen et al. (2007) that there is little appetite for approaches that polarise teacher- and student-centred approaches to learning. Students and teachers tend to agree that some combination or balance of these forms is desirable.
6. Discussion & Conclusions

This section briefly revisits the project’s purpose statement and research questions, clarifying how they have been responded to. It then reflects on limitations related to the theoretical perspectives employed, and limitations of typical ways that LOs are approached, positioned, and investigated in much of the wider literature. An argument is developed in favour of directly engaging with the multiplicity, contradiction and mess which emerges from the findings as characteristic of LOs. A set of metaphors is developed to capture these qualities, and these are put to work in the closing discussion and arguments to consolidate the contribution that this thesis makes to our understanding of LO’s contemporary nature and role in HE.

6.1 Revisiting and responding to the research statement & questions

The project set out to address the following purpose statement:

The purpose of this study is to explore how LOs are enacted as a policy object, from the perspective of teachers, leaders, and students from a range of degree-programme cases, and in two national settings (England and Norway). The interview-based case studies provide detailed accounts of the ways LO’s meaning is constructed and how they are used in planning, teaching, steering, and learning. Comparison across these contrasting disciplinary and national cases helps to identify contextual factors shaping enactment, as well as potential explanations for tendencies in enactment identified. Furthering our understanding about LOs in these ways is important to assess contested claims regarding their influence, and to inform the ongoing choices and actions of HE actors and policy makers.

The empirical work undertaken in this study set out to address four specific questions. RQ1: How are LOs constructed as a policy object in European policy and through practices described within selected English and Norwegian degree programmes? RQ2: If the constructions of LOs vary, what is the nature of this variation? What contextual features, factors, processes and mechanisms are implicated in constructing LO’s meaning and use? RQ3: Is there evidence of LO constructions and enactments influencing teaching-learning practices or how teachers and students experience HE? RQ4: Is there evidence of LO constructions and enactments influencing management and steering practices or re-shaping the influence managers, teachers, and students have within programmes? The key findings are summarised here around three themes that clarify how the publications have responded to and addressed the questions and the purpose statement.

Not only a ‘formal’ reform: influence on teaching, learning, steering & management

Publications 3 and 4 illustrate how LOs are being interpreted and put into practice. There are signs LOs have the potential to make positive contributions to teaching and learning (Publication 3). Respondents describe developing and updating LOs as an opportunity to focus on course planning and collaboration, particularly in the Norwegian cases. LOs provide a format and language that some teachers find helpful as a format or ‘recipe’ to set out aims and
rationales for courses and programmes; this can protect against excessively traditional teaching where intended outcomes are left implicit (Publication 4). LOs sometimes offer new ways for colleagues to consider how various courses ‘hang together’ for students, and students see LOs as a format which gives an overview of course content, what they will learn, and expected priority areas in assessments; they also recognise that LOs can help them put their own skills or knowledge into words in new ways (Publication 3). Finally, LOs may be encouraging more of a focus on alignment between intended LOs and assessment processes. However, developing this link between intended and assessed LOs is seen as challenging and requiring considerable additional work, even once course and programme LOs are in place. LOs have a limited or more ambiguous influence in other areas. There is little evidence of LOs being brought into day-to-day teaching events or activities, to guide the process of learning (Publication 3) or being used in a purposeful way to change how students engage with learning (Publication 4). The LO format frustrates some more experienced or confident teachers (Publication 3), and, although there is a sense that LOs are ‘intended’ to support shifts in teaching and learning approach, there is little clarity about how or to what ends (Publication 4). Publications 1, 3, and 4 all suggest it would be wrong to see LOs as only or primarily a pedagogic object. Rather, LOs appear to have a growing role, in steering, management and standards setting, in particular within QA processes (Publication 1 and 2). The processes to develop, update and approve LOs create new spaces and opportunities for management and oversight (Publications 3 and 4). Indeed, as LOs become a standard feature in university courses, many leaders and teachers anticipate they will be used as indicators for measurement and comparison (Publication 3). This anticipation is in line with evidence that QA agencies are seeking new LO-based approaches to assess quality and HE outputs (Publication 2).

The nature of the LO policy object: stable and standardising or adaptable and ambiguous?
The four publications suggest various mechanisms that shape LO enactment in opposing ways. Respondents describe working with LOs in pragmatic, flexible and ad-hoc ways, as they decide what LOs are for and the form they should take. Publications 1 and 3 describe how LOs may be ‘received’ as a vague or ambiguous policy object, but are made sense of through situated processes of meaning construction (the development of a local ontology) and this shapes subsequent enactment. Publication 3 discusses this variety in the enactment of LOs in relation to departmental cultures, disciplinary areas, variations in student groups, as well as individual actor’s preferences and approaches to teaching or learning. Publication 1 clarifies how the two country-cases offered differing policy and HE-system environments which ‘shaped’ degree-level LO practices, especially the pace of implementation and the forms of LOs that developed. LOs are made sense of in part by being assumed to relate to ‘bundles’ of national reforms that legitimise and require LOs as a response. In Norway LOs are related to Bologna and concerns about teaching quality; in England, LOs are related to the skills agenda and pressures to compete for and satisfy students paying high fees (Publication 3). While these national agendas are distinct, they underpin a common assumption that HE must provide more transparency,
demonstrable ‘value’, and accountability to students and society. Furthermore, the development of varied LOs across degree programmes, and tendencies towards ‘process’ forms, appears to be met with strong standardizing pressures: QA agencies and guidelines (and admissions bodies in Norway) encourage or require more ‘product’ types of LOs (Publications 1 and 2). One factor in LO’s success may be this ability to give an impression of flexibility, while still compelling some more standardised enactments.

**LO enactment as challenging, multi-stage, and incomplete: their uncertain influence**

Despite the different histories and conditions around LO’s arrival and initial implementation in the two countries (Publication 1), respondents describe similar steps, stages, and challenges in enacting LOs (Publications 3 and 4). Developing and applying LOs is an on-going, time-consuming process, where formal curricula LOs, or initial descriptive LOs, are unpacked or adapted in order to make them suitable for applications in planning, teaching or assessment, on different levels (course or programme level). Respondents also describe developing further varieties of LOs for use in external communication. These multiple applications require staff to develop, adjust and ‘tailor’ sets of LOs that serve these differing requirements, but which are also expected to retain some link or coherence. The difficulty and tensions involved in this are summed up by the process and product tendencies (Publication 3). LO enactment emerges as a resource-intensive, complex, iterative process, involving significant individual effort, teamwork, and negotiation. Publication 3 also suggests that process and product forms may be incompatible in the longer term: more concrete, measurement and standardisation-focused ‘product’ forms are expected to be promoted, possibly to the point that process forms are undermined. LO’s eventual role and influence remains uncertain.

**6.2 Reflecting on the findings: revisiting the theoretical lenses**

Together, these findings offer considerable detail and a range of insights about how LOs are constructed and enacted within degree programmes. This dissertation set out to engage with a range of problematic assumptions or contradictions surrounding LOs. The design had a comparative and multi-level scope, supported by a range of theories or lenses: the three axes model, the policy object perspective and the implementation staircase. Together, these mapped the potential enactment ‘territory’, set out framing assumptions about how policy enactment typically proceeds, and guided the data collection and initial analysis. This section re-visits these perspectives, in order to reflect on their contribution and limitations when it comes to making sense of and conveying the findings.

The three-axes mapping of LO’s nature and potential applications, based on Prøitz (2010) and Hussey and Smith (2008), provided an effective heuristic to manage the sprawl and ambiguity around LOs, while still approaching enactment in a relatively open, explorative way. The process and product forms identified in Publication 3 built on the three axes model explicitly, highlighting tensions and contradiction in LO tendencies. The process and product forms sum up the variety that emerges through a combination of the three-axes, and in this way
demonstrates how adding an extra axis, based on Hussey & Smith’s (2008) ‘level of application’, to Prøitz’s two-axes model, focused attention on the drift and incompatibility experienced as LOs are developed over different levels. The significant challenges that actors experience adapting LOs from one level to another might have been overlooked if Prøitz’s model was the only reference point. However, the overall dynamics and patterns of variety identified across the publications are harder to convey or capture in this model. Prøitz’s axes are based on continuums of uses and types, but the process and product tendencies seem to involve a fairly sharp ‘tipping point’ or distinction based on the level of specification and measurability expected from LOs. However, the findings do not suggest two entirely separate LO enactment processes, with ‘teaching focused’ process forms, and ‘management focused’ product forms, each operating in isolation. The work of formulating and developing LOs has largely been conducted by teaching staff, focused on course planning, coordination, and internal communication (process LOs); however, these same enactment processes create new spaces and pressures for management and steering applications (product LOs). The process and product forms of LOs, despite their contrasts, seem to be entangled with each other. The three axes model is limited as a way to convey or explain these dynamics.

The analytic framework built on a discursive view of policy and perspectives on implementation focused on the ground-level interpretation of policy ideas. This foregrounds the ways policy both shapes, and is shaped by, practices within specific contexts or settings. The policy object approach (Sin, 2014) set out expectations that LO’s meaning could only be established and stabilised by looking at how they are interpreted and constructed by actors (ontology) and their influence be understood in relation to these local interpretations moving into practice (enacted ontology). These perspectives on policy focus attention on interpretation and the potential for variety as actors and contexts re-shape LO policy. This supported the identification and description of LO enactments which reflect ambiguity, adaptations of LO ideas to varied settings, and a generally high level of ‘mess’ and sprawl in LO’s role within the degree programme cases. However, these perspectives are less helpful in explaining or integrating the tendency described in Publications 1, 2 and 3, where these diverse interpretations, functions, and roles are met by more standardised oversight and QA mechanisms.

While the empirical element of this research project focused on relatively ‘bottom-up’ processes of local enactment, the study also drew on approaches to national comparison that attend to national-system level features and influences, and this supported an interest in the role of QA agencies as a potential influence on local practices. Gornitzka, Kyvik, and Stensaker (2002) note that bottom-up approaches have often underestimated the role government reforms can have. Sabatier (2005, p. 23) similarly notes “bottom-uppers are likely to overemphasise the ability of the periphery to frustrate the centre” as much as top-downers can neglect lower level or peripheral influences in favour of central policy making. Despite the study being framed by policy perspectives stressing interpretation and contextual influence, the analysis of cases remained open and flexible enough to capture these more ‘top-down’ features. The common
tendencies to process and product forms, common challenges and stages in enactment, and perceived rise of product forms in reaction to QA and oversight processes found in both England and Norway also suggest LOs have the potential to be enacted, at least in some instances, as a policy tool of a relatively standardised, stable sort.

The process of policy implementation was approached through Reynolds & Saunders (1987) implementation staircase model, which was intended to convey implementation as a multi-stage, multi-level process, allowing diverse enactments to develop within different steps. This provided a way to consider potential links between the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels of LO enactment and highlight the potential for local re-interpretation of the European-driven LO agenda. Positioning LOs as a ‘policy object’ that moves through the levels of the staircase made allowance for designating LOs as a central topic, while recognising their meaning and influence might involve links to wider reform agendas. However, the findings don’t fit neatly with the notion of an LO ‘object’ traveling, step-by-step, through levels of implementation, leading to a range of versions. While LOs seem integral to various reform processes and act as policy tools in various ways, these have somewhat distinct enactment processes (e.g. LOs in curricula alignment, teaching and learning reforms, quality assurance). To capture these findings would require several staircases running in parallel, or around one another, with some steps linked or ‘shared’ between them. Kogan (2005) warned that the implementation staircase may unintentionally imply order, linearity, and ‘closure’; the LO enactment process described in the findings is hard to capture within this model for the same reasons. In summary then, the theories and perspectives used have proven valuable as a framework and set of lenses to support the empirical investigation of LOs. However, they do not provide a position from which it easy to sum up, interpret or sufficiently explain the findings.

### 6.3 Challenging and extending perspectives on LOs: linked metaphors of nets, knots and tangles

In trying to find fruitful and generative way to make sense of these findings, this section revisits the closing analysis and discussion from section 2, which described two ways some previous authors have responded to and handled LO’s tendency to sprawl, contradiction, and mess. An argument for an alternative approach to positioning and researching LOs is developed, based on engaging and working with these qualities more purposefully, through a range of metaphors.

One option to sum up the findings set out in section 6.1 would simply be to ‘stop’ here, and confirm that LO enactment is characterised by ambiguity, tension, and contradiction. While this would provide a defensible summary of the results, this does not advance our understanding of LOs. Previous authors have identified contradictions and tensions in LO forms and uses (Hussey and Smith, 2008; Scott, 2011; Prøitz’s, 2010, 2014; Hadjianastasis, 2017). The process and product forms (Publication 3) offer an additional way of capturing these tensions, which also attempts to develop a credible argument regarding the likely dynamics between these forms.
over time. However, this is essentially another way of working around LO’s mess and contradiction: it implies they are artefacts of incomplete implementation, which will be resolved over time through the dominance of one form, or an accommodation being found between them. Karseth (2008) describes a similar tendency in progress reporting on outcome-based qualification frameworks: implementation is acknowledged to be slow and challenging, but this is presented as a temporary ‘bump in the road’ not a sign of fundamental problems. Both the national histories of LO implementation described in Publication 1, and earlier waves of outcome-based reform described in Section 2, suggest contradiction and ambiguity are not a passing state or aberration in LO-based reforms, but common and persistent features.

The closing analysis and discussion of section 2 highlighted how previous conceptual and empirical work on LOs underscores their complexity and ambiguity, and suggested two common ways LOs are positioned or handled. One is to position LOs as a ‘great wave’ of reform, a relatively simple, formal or technical change in how learning is described and defined, which nonetheless triggers system transformation. A second approach is to approach LOs as a range of ‘discrete tools’ or interventions, acting on a specific area of practice or set of actors. The findings and arguments developed across the publications fit neither approach, although they echo elements of both. Neither do the findings line-up neatly with critics’ or proponents’ predictions about the influence of LOs. An alternative way of working with and making sense of the mess and contradiction surrounding LO reforms is needed. In developing one possible approach, I draw on metaphorical pluralism of the sort Sfard (1998) advocates as a fruitful, even necessary way to understand learning and other complex phenomena. This interpretive ‘move’ accepts we need more than one metaphor to understand some phenomena, but also accepts we will never understand such phenomena fully. This puts aside intractable and largely unhelpful questions about what LOs are, or which version of them is most real (ontological questions) and focuses on how the perspectives and metaphors we apply to them determine the stories and knowledge we construct about them (epistemological questions). Sfard (1998) points out metaphors and theories play a similar role: they help us grapple with and study complex phenomena, but also build in assumptions and limit how we understand them. This can be illustrated in terms of what is overlooked by positioning LO’s ‘as if’ they are a ‘great wave’ or a set of ‘discrete tools’. If we see LOs as one great wave, we assume a fundamental ‘unity’ underpinning the resulting applications and changes, that the cascade of reforms related to them carry a similar logic and tend to create compatible structures and practices. This overlooks questions about the mechanisms and processes that create and maintain this ‘sameness’, or link enactments across different levels or contexts. This view of LOs risks underestimating the potential for divergence, unintended or counter-productive influences. On the other hand, positioning and approaching LOs ‘as if’ they are a range of ‘discrete tools’ tools, each with specific, bounded functions and influences, might facilitate more focused empirical research on LO’s effects, but overlooks the potential for spill-over or influences, where LO enactments in one area shape what is seen as possible or legitimate in others. The risk here is
that evidence related to specific uses of LOs is presented as representing their broader nature or influence, as illustrated by Biggs’ (1996) constructive alignment work being widely used to support the claim that LOs foster deep learning, when Biggs himself argues this depends on systematic reform of teaching environments, and active work to avoid narrow or instrumentalise learning being encouraged by LO approaches.

In pointing out what these ways of positioning LOs overlook, I do not criticise those using them, per se. Rather, I intend to highlight how metaphors shape our understanding, and draw attention to the gaps between the simplifications we study and the phenomena themselves (Ashwin, 2012; Sayer, 2010). One way of reducing (yet not altogether avoiding) this gap is to ask if choosing only one approach is necessary, or if metaphors might be found that link up or unite important, but diverging perspectives on LOs. The findings in this thesis, and some entrenched debates around LO reforms, might be better (or at least differently) understood when viewed through three linked metaphors: LOs as a broad policy ‘net’, LOs as a range of distributed ‘knots’ of enactment, and LOs as the site of some significant ‘tangles’ in practice, where LO’s contradictions and ambiguity are most exposed. This approach “stands on more than one metaphorical leg” (Sfard, 1998, p. 11) and so allows us to shift and broaden how we see LOs. The nets, knots and tangles are not bigger and smaller versions of the same thing, nor are they entirely separable. They are intended to provide what Mol and Law (2002) refer to as “ways out of singularity”, analytical strategies that “generate a pluralism in which divergent parts of the world coexist within their own insulated spheres” but “also overlap and interfere with one another” (p. 8). The nature of these metaphors, and their relationship to the theoretical foundations of this project, are described in more detail, before being put to work to synthesise and interpret the findings.

**The metaphors’ relationship to underpinning theoretical perspectives**

The metaphors relate to and extend some of the theoretical assumptions underpinning this thesis, to support a more coherent response to the empirical findings (building on the limitations set out in section 6.1) and offering some new ways of understanding and reconciling previous research on LOs. LO’s ability to link up several powerful reform discourses, and act as a central device in successful standardisation-focused formal structures, makes them a powerful policy agenda, which effectively legitimises and constrains what ‘appropriate’ applications of LOs look like in practice. The net represents these qualities: an interwoven set of values, assumptions, aims and LO-based structures which combine to create a macro ‘story’ about what LOs are, the form(s) they should take, their expected impact and broader norms about how learning should be organised and assessed. This net links up key topics in HE, interweaving threads of transparency, accountability, the need for demonstrable relevance in HE, and weaves in a view of educational as a plannable, largely orderly process. The capacity to weave together many threads is important to LOs’ appeal and ‘panacea’ nature (Muller, 1998), and allows them to contain and conceal ambiguity or contradiction. It is this quality that makes it important we engage with LO’s critically, to consider the broader LOs discourses, practices and structures.
they legitimise and facilitate. This emphasises a similar ‘embeddedness’ to that described in the policy object approach, and offers another way to foreground the inter-dependence of adjacent policy agendas, ideas, and structures. The net metaphor also captures the cumulative influences of LOs: specific enactments might seem largely symbolic, or formal, but together they may still shift discourses, assumptions, theories or practices in meaningful ways. The long-running critique and opposition to LO approaches, and calls for alternative, broader notions of LOs, are not absent from this net, but are ‘woven into’ it as subordinate discourses. These alternative LO strands may be brought into specific knots and tangles of enactment, but cannot convincingly be said to define the net’s dominant logic or typical approaches. In this way, some of the most powerful, critical LO discourses can be contained and ‘blurred together’ with other LOs ideas, as illustrated by SCL as a high-profile, but vague and low-influence aspect of the LOs agenda.

The metaphors of ‘knots and tangles’ focus attention on LO practices and enactments as dispersed, potentially varied, but nonetheless linked to the net. The findings here illustrate LOs in practice in fairly ordered and ‘as intended’ forms (knots) and enactments that are messy and draw in issues or ideas that are less of a coherent ‘fit’ with the wider LO agenda (tangles). The discursive perspective on policy and the view of LOs as a policy object, are compatible with these metaphors in assuming a mutually constitutive relationship between policy and practice, discourse and enactment. While the ‘net’ focuses our attention on ontology and discourse, it is not ‘without’ structures, and it is not separate from specific enactments; the knots and tangles focus attention on the range of situated practices and enacted ontology, which together make up the wider LO agenda, but it is not assumed their nature is entirely determined by the net. The knots and tangles ‘reflect’ and are shaped by LO discourses, but have, in turn, some potential to ‘fashion and transform’ discourses (Durnova at al., 2016). As enactment progresses, it is also accepted that LO nets and knots can and do take on structural qualities: as illustrated by LOs within the EQF, standardised course descriptions based on LOs, and standardised measures of LOs. Compared to the three-axes model, or the implementation staircase, these metaphors present less risk of suggesting we are identifying separate LO ‘things’, or one ‘thing’ that manifests over several levels; the attempt to convey LOs in terms of multiplicity.

6.4 Applying the metaphors to three challenges in LO enactment

I focus on three problematic areas of the findings, and wider LO debates, which can be re-examined through these metaphors. To illustrate how these arguments relate to but also go beyond the original perspectives used, key points are summarised within a revised figure of the implementation staircase (Figure 4).
The appeal and incoherence of ‘transparency’ in LO reforms

A recurrent theme in the debates around LOs is the value of transparency (Allais, 2003; Young, 2003; Cort, 2010; Wolf, 1995) and the need to make what HE does more explicit. The notion of LOs presented in EU policy focuses on making learning more orderly, accessible, standardised, coherent, clear and comparable. The notion of ‘transparency’ is widely invoked as covering all these qualities, and as an absolute, unquestionable ‘good’. As Stoller (2015) observes: “Over the last 20 years, the use of definable and measurable learning outcomes has increasingly become a requirement for justifying curricular and pedagogical practices. To suggest the opposite—that the systematic use of learning outcomes is not only unnecessary but actually may inhibit or disrupt deep learning—would be to appear on the wrong side of logic: as anti-transparency, anti-science and anti-growth.” (p. 317) However, attempting to unpack the ‘black box’ of university-level learning in the name of transparency should not be approached as an unproblematic, or simply technical, challenge. Strathern (2000) is one of many scholars who describe how processes of ‘making the invisible visible’, for example assessing and auditing learning, can have a ‘tyrannous’ side, prioritising external judgments and creating pressures to ‘perform’ on relatively arbitrary indicators. The net of LOs interweaves at least two contrasting threads of transparency: one focused on enhancing clarity ‘within’ learning communities, and particularly on student engagement and empowerment, and one focused on control, audit and oversight, prioritising external ‘readability’ and explicitness.
The discourse around LOs as an EU reform demonstrates notions of transparency linked with democratisation and opening up the learning process to empower students. But as Publication 4 demonstrates, the way student centred-learning and LOs are enacted suggests these notions are vague, and suggests LOs and SCL enactments have an ambiguous, even incompatible relationship. The findings suggest teachers and students think there are forms of clarity that support and aid learning, and there is clarity that narrows or ‘dumbs down’. Transparency is not understood by these actors as an absolute ‘opening up’ and explication of learning, but a more pragmatic process where teachers provide landmarks and guidance, identifying a path through literature and disciplines, alongside an expectation that students must grapple with some uncertainty, frustration, and, hopefully, discovery. Despite SCL weaving some democratic or empowerment notions into the LO net, Publication 4 notes there is little sign of LOs acting to transfer power to students, and, in practice, they tend to shift the power to decide what is learnt and how upwards, to leaders or managers. The enactment of LO’s linked to SCL are ‘tangles’, where vague notions of empowerment or learner-centredness play out in varied, uncertain, limited ways. In contrast, the international interest in LOs within QA processes (Publication 2) reveals increasingly specific rules and expectations about how LOs should be defined and applied consistently to achieve transparency. These guidelines promote certain kinds of LOs, and actors within the degree programmes also describe pre-emptively developing more concrete and assessable LOs than are, strictly required, because they anticipate demand for them from QA bodies. In summary, the knots and tangles identified and described in this thesis suggest different notions of transparency being enacted. The robust and consistent knots enacting a control and oversight variety of transparency suggests this is very much the dominant discourse in the LO net. The ubiquity of transparency, and it’s potential to imply a range of ‘goods’ makes it easy to overlook as a source of tension: no one is ‘against’ transparency. But if we problematise its meaning it is clear that LO approaches which aim at enhanced transparency involve messy, complicated, and perhaps deliberately misleading discourses. The coming sections will also argue that LO approaches developed in the pursuit of transparency may not lead to elegant solutions or clarity, but to even more tangled, messy practices proliferating around them.

**LOs as both a ‘fluid’ and ‘canonical’ policy object**

LOs are promoted as a central tool for European standardisation and harmonisation, but also a technology or form flexible enough to fit a great variety of HE courses, disciplinary areas, and national HE cultures. This immediately builds in an ambitious or ambiguous aim to the LOs agenda. I suggested above (section 6.1) that the findings identify LOs enactments with more adaptable, ambiguous tendencies and more standardising, stable tendencies, and note that this presents a challenge in how we position, describe, or define LOs. The net-knot-tangle dynamic offers some explanations for how this contradiction is contained and why LO’s having fluid and canonical qualities is important to their success. One particularly explicit set of LOs knots
can be seen in LO-based qualification frameworks, linking the EQF and national frameworks, with LOs providing a common format and approach. This clearly has a harmonising intent and function. This thesis identifies and investigates the knots and tangles that emerge as LO’s influence is extended downwards from these formal, curricula-level ‘knots’. The way LOs are mediated through QA regulations suggests two ways in which the LO enactment process is canonical, and avoids pressures that often change or re-interpret educational reforms. Sin (2012, p. 401) suggests that the Bologna agenda is ‘decoded’ in nationally-distinct ways due to cultural factors and systemic conditions influencing the way policy is understood, and due to multiple opportunities for policy to be translated over steps of the implementation staircase. The alignment of QA regulations seems to work around both of these, firstly as the language and procedures used in national QA agencies is so consistent, due to international guidelines and standards for QA that have emerged in parallel with LO-reforms. These seems a clear example of the ‘governance of governance’ and common grammar Magalhães et al., describe (2013) as driving convergence in HE values and practices. The relatively consistent ways in which QA agencies encourage or require LOs to be used, and the significant attention and concern respondents grant QA agencies, means that the series of QA-LO knots essentially ‘leapfrogs’ many steps of the implementation staircase, insulating LOs from opportunities for national or local re-interpretation or adjustment. This demonstrates a neat series of enactment ‘knots’, linking high-level notions of legitimate, or important LO applications, with department-level activity in a surprisingly direct way. In contrast, the development of LOs in course planning, teaching, and learning is looser, related to varied concerns, priorities, disciplinary cultures, departmental traditions and varied students. Trowler (2002) stresses the importance of the differences between ‘canonical’ or ‘non-canonical’ forms of policy when studying implementation. He argues that: “[n]on-canonical practices tend to play out in complex and diverse practice on the ground, being recommended, encouraged and perhaps even incentivized, but not enforced. Canonical practices form official ‘road maps’ that institutions have little choice but to follow. Quality assurance has often been argued to operate in the canonical area, and it may be that LOs, as a QA indicator or tool, might function in a similar way in time.” (2002: p.5). In many theories and perspectives on policy implementation, LOs being both canonical and non-canonical might be something of a paradox, or a sign that more evidence is needed to establish if LOs are most accurately understood as a ‘top-down’, canonical policy, or a messier, ‘bottom-up’ policy. These are not be particularly helpful questions in relation to the nets, knots and tangles metaphors. The findings may, however, suggest it is important to ‘push back’ against some constructivist notions of policy enactment, and focus more on the power of structures. Even socially constructed features of education, like qualification frameworks, standard formats, and regulations can, simply ‘make us’ act or change practices, regardless of how actors perceive or feel about a reform (Ashwin, 2012). I argue that a key source of LO’s success as a policy object is an ability to compel significant enactment ‘as intended’, while giving an impression of flexibility which helps maximise their appeal among various actors. This kind of flexibility does not imply they have limited power, or lack structural qualities.
Law’s (2004) description of policy or interventions which act as ‘fluid technologies’ describes how fluidity and rigidity can be combined, where policy takes on shifting forms, while still exerting a stable, significant influence over diverse enactments. Law offers the example of a scheme for clean water in rural communities: each community is given a basic pump kit, with the expectation they install and assemble it, maintain it and replace parts that wear out using whatever is available locally. Over time, the pumps’ initial uniformity disappears, but their impact is the same, and they remain part of the same intervention. LOs share similar qualities. In the case studies, degree-level LOs seem to have been initially received as a relatively administrative or formal tool, often accepted a relatively meaningless change in the terms used to describe courses. As they have been developed, degree-level activity has focused course planning and internal communication uses of LOs. This achieved the installation of LO knots which may have been developed, adapted, and maintained by local communities with considerable discretion and idiosyncrasy, to result in local tangles. Some of these LO tangles show promise as a way of guiding teaching work, coordinating courses, reviewing planning and assessment, and communicating with students. So far, so similar to the water pumps. But, as Law (2004) stressed, even fluid policy can carry something stable. The establishment of LOs as a ‘common currency’ or standardised form across courses, creates conditions that facilitate and foster the development of other types of LOs. The initial, innocuous LO knots (intended, official applications) play a crucial role in enactment, ‘casting out’ the net over a range of areas, levels and sites. Allowing some tangles to form has been essential to sustaining and extend the net further: LOs require ground-level staff to weave the edges of the LO net downwards and outwards, to develop, maintain, and create new LOs. Their willingness to do this seems to be encouraged by the more ‘fluid’ impression of process LOs, and departments allowing some leeway for teachers apply them as they see fit. However, these relatively fluid enactments may still serve to constrain and steer future actions. As well as effectively extending the LO net’s reach, the language and discourse of LOs is normalised. Neave (2009) stresses the potential power of new terms and terminology: “Shifts in such terminology are both a pointer to, and a handmaiden for, legitimizing the priorities they underwrite through constant use, repetition and application. Making the radical banal is then as important a function in higher education policy as implementation itself” (p. 26). Furthermore, even LOs intended to be used in applications other than measurement or oversight may be used in those ways, or adapted to suit them, in an educational environment that is pre-occupied with comparing, measuring, and setting standards wherever possible (Biesta, 2009). The limited resistance to LOs found here and previous research, despite the well-recognised concerns about LO approaches, does not necessarily demonstrate support. It may even suggest a degree of complicity or resignation, where those working with LOs accept them as a necessary or overall-positive reform, despite recognised limitations or risks. Scott suggests that “[j]ust as students do with assessments, academics have learnt to mirror what is required by the quality process and revel in their conspiracy at the cappuccino bar” (2011, p. 5). It may be that university staff in both countries generally accept oversight via metrics, measurement, and comparison, as either acceptable or inevitable.
However, it may be that teaching staff and those weaving and extending the LOs net within degree programmes, do not really recognise the macro, net-like developments occurring: they are focused on making their ‘local’ knots and tangles work as well as possible. If that is the case, the nets, knots and tangles may illustrate a successful example of what Hall (2005) refers to as a ‘double-shuffle’: political reform strategies based on ‘hybrid’ or ‘ensemble’ constructions, where a dominant policy position (the dominant discourse of the net) is concealed by a very different, ‘subordinate’ one. Hall describes how neo-liberal reforms are often carried into practice through a double-shuffle of reforms claiming social democratic and egalitarian values. Success rests on ‘shifting’ or shuffling between two positions which, if explicitly set out side by side, are clearly incompatible. The subordinate value is highlighted in the introduction of the policy, in a way that creates conditions on the ground that make it inevitable or impossible to resist further changes once the dominant position is revealed, or is impossible to conceal any longer (Hall, 2005). Having convinced academics to ‘accept’ LOs as a flexible, relatively low-impact, primarily pedagogy-focused reform, there is still the potential for structures built on those terms to be adapted and re-purposed to support standardisation and steering focused LOs. If nothing else, then, LOs are clearly widely accepted and embedded as a normal, uncontroversial way to communicate about degree level education, within and outside of universities. In as much as LOs are revealed to be changing practices, even if in complex, contradictory ways, we must assume it very like they are also shifting “the shaping beliefs and assumptions that urge on, underpin and lie behind operational and grounded change.” (Neave, 2009, p.28).

**LO knots, tangles, and the net: the dynamic between them and the future of LOs**

So far then, these metaphors have been used to present LOs as a net which inter-weaves a wide range of HE challenges and agendas, legitimises LOs as a response to these concerns, and offers a way to mobilise and sometimes conceal contrasting values or ideas. Transparency is argued to be a central value that contains tensions which are more evident when specific enactments of SCL tangles and QA knots are compared. It has also been suggested that the implementation of LOs so far has required teachers and other ground-level actors to actively weave and extend the LO net, and that a degree of ambiguity and fluidity has been important to this process succeeding. This initial acceptance of LOs is argued to rest on a dynamic between the net, and enactments of a more canonical (knot) and fluid (tangled) sort which may become more problematic and obvious over time. In this section I suggest how ongoing enactment might play out. The picture presented so far is of an LO net which is a work in progress, with some strong, neat knots, and also significant tangles and mess. I suggest that further implementation will involve either continuing to make the net bigger and messier, as LO applications sprawl and attempts are made to link these essentially incommensurable forms of LO via ever-greater specification; or, if the net is to be closed up and used as a source of standardisation, accountability and new forms of measurement, a determined processes of de-tangling and tidying up is inevitable, which will limit the roles LOs can play.
Spirals of specificity: a massive, messy, net

Hussey and Smith’s warned in 2008 that LOs are “misused to the point of being controversial and a bureaucratic burden” (2008, p.107) and that LOs developed for specific teaching and learning events, courses, and programmes require different types of LOs, and are fundamentally different things. The analysis here supports the incompatibility of different LO forms, and suggests that there is scope for them to become a much greater bureaucratic burden than they are so far. Teachers describe considerable challenges in ‘laddering’ or linking LOs from course to programme level, or in attempts to apply course-level LOs directly in teaching activities or assessment; developing LO-based assessment criteria or marking rubrics requires further, detailed work, and often reveals LO’s limitations as a way to capture more esoteric or complex learning. This is one of the key ways that LO’s promises of simplicity unravel the more they are applied. If efforts are made to ‘close the gaps’, and link LOs developed to describe and clarify courses, with very concrete assessment practices or marking criteria, this is likely to demonstrate that the various forms of LOs developed so far are very far from being ‘the same’. Allais described the South African experience of outcome-based reforms as one that led to ‘spirals of specificity’, where criterion-based assessment approaches were endlessly specified, added to, expanded on, and revised in a fruitless effort to capture what students should achieve in sufficient detail. This dynamic of pursuing precision and clarity, but never quite arriving, lends LOs a quality of ‘pseudo-exactness’, where they stubbornly continue to require expert judgement to intervene to assess what an LO looks like in practice (Hussey & Smith, 2008, p. 111). While LOs maintain their potential to be many things to many people, and to be developed in more fluid ways for teaching and internal communication, they will generate mess and tangles which frustrate the aims of concretely-describing and pinning down learning. Instead of an elegant, standardised unit, LOs may encourage excessively detailed descriptions, which still fail to make expectations or assessment criteria entirely explicit and transparent. Avoiding this spiraling requires some level of descriptive ‘mess’ to be retained: authors variously refer to this as fuzzy standards (Sadler, 1987) ‘a corridor of tolerance’ (McAlpine et al. 1999) and respondents in England tended to talk about ‘wiggle room’. These all focus on the need to accept that explicating LOs usually involves some reference to context, and the meaning of particular words being interpreted within specific subject areas or community (Scott, 2011; Hussey & Smith, 2002). What makes a compelling or creative argument, or counts as demonstrating a certain outcome, has to remain somewhat opaque. Attempts to work around the need for interpretation and judgement in learning seems likely to lead to more mess, as well as to tremendous, resource-intensive effort.

A neat, strong, and constraining net

If, as is discussed in Publication 3, a product form of LOs comes to dominate in HE, as canonical, product forms are promoted or required, the existing variety and more ‘tangled’ aspects of LO enactment will have to be tidied up. Sfard points out that the most useful combinations of metaphors are those that are not incompatible, but incommensurable (1998): we can use them
to recognise the same phenomena, but we cannot ever directly map one onto the other, or measure them in the same way. This principle is an important one for LOs. The messier, process-type LO enactments show more potential as a way to generate discussion and communication between colleagues and students, and are often perceived as helpful for teaching and learning; it might be possible to use these as a relatively ‘rough’ form to compare between courses, or clarify a course to a potential student or outsider, but this is a very long way from the idea that the kinds of LOs in HE now are commensurable. LOs often defy meaningful pre-definition, prediction, or measurement. If the LOs net is to be used to capture, measure, and compare learning in new, more direct ways, these kinds of LOs will not do. While the enactments of LOs identified in this work, and other studies, may, at times, seem tantalisingly close to being ‘the same’ thing over different sites, they are not. Even generic LOs are fraught with problems when it comes to comparing them (Ashwin, 2015; Douglas et al. 2012). If LOs are to fulfil their standardising or learning-measurement potential, or units for new HE indicators, local enactments of messier sorts will need to be tidied up into more standard forms, or re-cast as low-priority descriptive-only LOs, while concrete, measurable LOs are assessed and prioritised.

6.5 Implications of these arguments about learning outcomes

The implications of this view of LOs for those working with LOs in university teaching and learning, and those driving national and international LO policies, are discussed here.

Implications for teachers or teaching leaders

It is important to highlight the ways in which LOs are positively received in relation to teaching and learning. LOs can mitigate bad teaching and offer clear information for prospective students, or students choosing new modules; they may well reduce the chances of students encountering courses in which aims and expectations are deeply implicit or opaque. However, this potentially positive role in teaching and learning should not be assessed in isolation; it is important that those developing LOs have a sense of their local enactments relate to, extend and may even change the LO net. Even half-hearted, highly formal enactments of LOs still serve to create new opportunities for oversight, extend the ‘knots’ and LO’s reach as a standardised unit for learning, and encourage an acceptance of LOs as more normal, innocuous and legitimate. Communicating the multi-level role of LOs to those developing them is therefore important to allow them to decide how to enact them more purposefully. Those involved in teaching in universities can only decide how comfortable they are with extending the LO net, and its potential role in relatively robust, top-down oversight, quality assurance, measurement, and steering processes, if they are made aware of them. Strategies to highlight and problematise the aim of transparency and approach to assessment are particularly important; these issues are not foregrounded in the ‘how to’ guidance provided by institutions and EU organisations for those developing LOs. The ‘process’ or ‘product’ forms developed here also provide a way to unpack LO’s conflicting applications and roles, and again underline the significant choices to be made
in how tightly LOs are used in assessment. These LO issues can be linked to the well-evidenced, and well-understood issues of backwash effects from over-specified assessment, student instrumentalism, and the associated risks of narrowing down degree-level courses.

It is also important that those working with LOs are made aware of potential ways they might be able to weave in and strengthen subordinate discourses from the LO net into their practices. Student empowerment, engagement and student-centredness, while weakly enacted in the cases studies here, can be put to work in LO approaches. If a more explicit emphasis is placed on LOs as a way to pursue transformative forms of learning, or support constructivist approaches to assessment, this tangles in much more powerful, concrete ideas into the LO discourse than the vague notions of learner-centredness. By highlighting the questions of ‘what kind of learning do we mean’ and ‘who should decide what success looks like’ these ideas also make it much harder to conceal tensions and ambiguities in LO enactments that ‘transparency’ and SCL ideas contain. There is already a range of work, particularly by Boud (2017), Tai et al. (2018), and Balloo et al. (2018), describing LO strategies focused on being specific about what is expected of students by involving them in teaching and learning processes that develop shared understandings of what relatively loose ‘expected’ LOs mean in practice, or should be assessed. These embrace the justified demand that students should receive guidance and need landmarks and some clarity about the learning they are undertaking, without tending towards spirals of specificity or ‘spoon feeding’. Weaving in practices which pursue transformative learning and constructivist assessment to local LO enactment would, at the least, create more ‘tangles’ in enactment, and might even disrupt or challenge dominant LO discourses, and contribute to re-making aspects of the LO net.

**Implications for policy makers: LOs can’t be all things to all people**

Here, the main point to be made reiterates an argument made by many previous authors: it is extraordinarily unlikely, based on empirical previous work and the findings here, that LOs can succeed as a kind of HE reform ‘panacea’ (Muller, 1998), that can radically change teaching and learning and also provide a new source of measurement or steering-appropriate outcomes within HE. To implement LOs based on the assumption they can be ‘all things to all people’ (Hadjianastasis, 2017) risks creating the kind of enormous, unwieldy LO net, which fulfils a wide range of applications poorly, and soaks up considerable effort and resources that might be better spent on more fundamental, boring teaching and learning activities. The desire to open up the learning that takes place in degree-programmes, and force it to make more sense to outsiders, to yield to measurement and assessment, might be pursued on the basis of genuine beliefs that this kind of transparency is a force for more accessible, relevant and well-run HE systems. But pursuing these aims through LOs has the potential to undermine the learning process. The unintended influences of over-zealous efforts to measure, compare, and set targets in education are well understood. LOs apparent simplicity and neutrality may be another part of their appeal in policy circles, but this is also deeply problematic: any tool that aspires to re-shape teaching and learning inevitably plays a role in determining what learning is prioritised,
how it is pursued, and who gets to decide these issues. These are far from non-normative interventions. The profound ambiguity and tension around many previous LO enactments, and those studied here, suggests they are in danger of becoming what Fischer refers to as “an appealing displacement activity” where ideological issues are avoided by being re-packaged as technical challenges and essentially saving up the problems for later (Fischer, 2003). The idea that making HE ‘transparent’ is a simple process or a technical challenge only is fundamentally misguided or dishonest. As James (2005) argues, this idea we can use LOs to ‘cut to the chase’ is wrong: “[R]eality is more complex. The educational landscape is characterized by a range of interests and values, policies and practices, and few simple or straightforward alignments between government, agencies, schools, colleges, teachers, parents, learners, and so on. This complexity also gives rise to differences in what outcomes of learning are seen as desirable and which are celebrated, and by whom.” (James, 2005, p. 93).

It is, of course, unrealistic to expect policy makers or stakeholders outside of universities to stop all attempts to measure university-level learning, or place fewer demands for evidence of HE’s contribution. However, it is inevitable and pragmatic, based on the complexity of these aims, to accept they must be pursued in ways that draw on broader notions of evidence and evaluation than narrow indicator and measurements which prioritise comparability and simplicity over other concerns. The pursuit of internationally standardised, or discipline generic outcomes, are likely to present a veneer of neutrality, conceal meaningful debates about necessary variety in educational values and outcomes, and lead to measures which are severely limited in their validity and open to gaming and distortion. Previous LO reforms that pursued measurement-focused LOs, and direct assessment of higher learning, have fared badly (Allais, 2007; Young 2007). Similarly, the quest for a ‘holy grail’ of LO measurement that captures ‘generic’ skills, allowing comparison of learning across countries and all types of courses, has been beset by fundamental conceptual and methodological challenges, in many previous attempts (Banta, 2007; Douglass et al., 2012; Ashwin 2015).

Learning outcomes have already supported a significant extension of the European HE-architecture, and provided a way to harmonise course structures and formats. To demand they go further, and are enacted in highly consistent, concrete, and measurable ways, will not only undermine pedagogic roles, but bring to the surface tensions and ambiguities in values and ideology that are largely concealed or contained so far. I would suggest that those driving the LOs agenda, and in particular QA enactments, consider the possibility of engaging with understandable pressures and demands for HE’s role and outcomes to be made clearer, and justified to those outside HE, in a way which accepts this cannot be based on direct measures or ‘technical’ evidence alone. This requires policy makers to let go of the “cult of the measurable” (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010) and the idea LOs can provide new, robust targets or performance indicators not beset by the problems of previous measures and indicators of learning. Re-balancing and widening notions of quality, in ways such as those described by McGuire and Gibbs (2013) would allow existing notions of quality to be linked to, or at least
be accompanied by assessments and judgements by experts (academics and teachers); accepting a role for expert judgement in interpreting and assessing LOs, within frameworks or structures that support significant consistency and defend minimum standards in HE, can respond to calls for clarity and accountability, with less risk than a more rigid and narrow pursuit of LOs.

### 6.6 Closing comments

In summing up this thesis, I hope it demonstrates the value and potential contribution of research on policy enactment which takes a multi-level, comparative approach, and which focuses on problematisation and a relatively ‘binocular’ or flexible use of theory. This approach has supported this thesis in linking up existing bodies of work and developing new ways of making sense of and explaining LO issues which might appear paradoxical, ambiguous, contradictory, or simply messy, within a simpler approach. There is much more to explore and understand about LO’s contemporary role in HE. This study only looked at traditional universities. However, comparing patterns of LO enactment across different types of institution might clarify how they are shaped by market and national-political forces, and mediated by different levels of institutional autonomy. This might also identify settings where there is more or less ‘resistance’ and creative disruption of LO approaches, shedding more light on teachers LO practices. There is also a growing body of ‘guidance’ and ‘best practice’ literature developing around degree-level LOs. Analysing these sources to see how they reinforce, legitimise, and promote certain forms of LOs may help evidence if and how certain forms and applications of LOs are gaining prominence and influence.

The topic of LOs, and the approach taken to studying them here, both seem to confront an issue Bateson (2002) highlights as an inherent risk of our attempts to understand the world through models or theories. We easily forget that the models or schema we design to make sense of aspects of reality are just that, and start to behave as though these models are the real thing and so can determine what will happen. We forget that ‘the map is not the territory’ and so believe that, by defining intended learning outcomes, we can make that learning happen. Taking a more modest view of LO’s potential as a rougher guiding tool, a structure for ‘a bit more’ standardisation, rather than the trigger for a fundamental change, seems prudent to avoid excessively ambitious, or excessively constraining enactments. The inevitability of gaps between our models and the reality we study also applies to the research challenges and ideas this thesis has grappled with. The complexity and mess in contemporary HE reform agendas must, inevitably be handled through theories, perspectives and research approaches that order and work around these characteristics to some extent. However, being too focused on one perspective, or forgetting our theories are as much metaphors as they are maps, risks overlooking situations where mess, ambiguity, and contradiction play a significant role in shaping how policy plays out in practice, and the influence it achieves. Far from being ‘noise’ in the HE system, which research should try and filter out, these qualities can be significant and meaningful in themselves. Attempting to engage with mess and contradiction in policy enactment a bit more, and handle theoretical perspectives and assumptions a little more lightly,
inevitably builds in other limitations. The theories that inform this thesis are incomplete and imperfect; the discussion here is somewhat ‘sketchy’ and perhaps closer to an allegory than traditional policy research findings. But this explorative approach to policy enactment complements more focused, singular research. The idea of generativity, of finding creative ways of linking knowledge from sub-communities within HE research, or resolving apparent inconsistencies between them, builds on the tensions and problems that emerge between more theoretically focused, bounded research work. The guiding aim here has been to investigate LOs in a both critical and constructive way, which brings together, problematises and extends what we understand about the topic of LOs and provides ‘useful’ insights for those working with them. Considering the findings and enactments through the metaphors of LOs as a net and series of knots and tangles, underlines their status as a reform agenda whose eventual influence remains unclear, and which will continue to need sustained, deliberate and critical analyses of its trajectory.
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Part II: Publications
Publication 2

Impact of assessment initiatives on quality assurance

Abstract: External quality assurance has played a key role in higher education policy since the 1980s. This chapter discusses whether there is a closer integration of external quality assurance with learning outcomes, mediated through various qualification frameworks. It examines implications of this potential integration might be for both quality enhancement and for accountability. The chapter begins by advancing conceptual ways in which external quality assurance and learning outcomes could be linked. It describes ways in which external quality assurance and learning outcomes could be coupled, looking at case study systems of Europe, the United States and Australia. The chapter concludes by reflecting on improvement and accountability implications arising from emerging couplings, and on how external quality assurance and learning outcomes can be linked.

Keywords: external quality assurance; qualification frameworks; measurement challenges; integrating quality frameworks

Introduction

External quality assurance can be said to have been a key concept in higher education policies since the latter part of the 1980s, and one often associated with a shift from the former input-oriented focus on higher education, to more output and result-orientations among policy-makers (Ball, 2009). This shift can be said to have had several parallel paths with external quality assurance on the one side, and the establishment of national qualification frameworks and an increased emphasis on learning outcomes on the other.

Both paths can be said to have several important consequences for the governance of the higher education sector. The dominant approach in Europe and many other regions and countries has been to establish a national system for quality assurance where external agencies are mandated to directly evaluate and assess both subject areas and study programs at various levels (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). Such systems have in turn impacted on higher education institutions, as external quality assurance has been focused on the responsibilities of those institutions to establish internal quality management systems (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010). However, although quality assurance has had several effects within higher education, not least with respect to how study programs are managed.
and led, supported and reported upon, these procedures have not led to convincing evidence that student learning has improved as a consequence (Stensaker, 2008). This is perhaps one of the key drivers behind the establishment of national qualification frameworks in a number of countries, and not least, an increased focus on learning outcomes. A specific example being the criticism of the United States accreditation system some years ago, where quality assurance was argued to be too focused on process and too little on the product—what students learned (Ewell, 2008).

Of course, in many other countries the interest in learning outcomes has been relatively de-coupled from developments in external quality assurance, and more closely linked to curriculum changes (Burke, 1995), to innovation attempts (Buss, 2008), attempts to increase the relevance of study programs (Jessup, 1991), or to improve the structuring of educational systems through a hierarchical ordering of qualifications (Hussey & Smith, 2003). The question is whether we are now witnessing a closer integration of external quality assurance with learning outcomes as they are mediated through various qualification frameworks, and what the implications of this potential integration might be for both quality enhancement and for accountability.

This issue will be described and discussed in this chapter. The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we present some conceptual ways in which external quality assurance and learning outcomes could be linked, which will serve as our analytical point of departure. We then describe the ways in which external quality assurance and learning outcomes seem to be coupled in practice in various parts of the world, in particular Europe, the United States and Australia. We then discuss and reflect upon the possible implications of these couplings regarding improvement and accountability, with an eye on whether current uses of learning outcomes in external quality assurance may have unintended consequences, and whether there is still room for improvements in how external quality assurance and learning outcomes can be linked.

**Links between external quality assurance and learning outcomes: A conceptualization**

In most countries learning outcomes are currently visible as part of existing or emerging national qualification frameworks. Basically, the idea of a qualification framework is threefold (Adam, 2004). First, it is intended as a planning tool for higher education institutions in their development of existing and new study programs. Second, it provides documentation of what students have learned and what competences they have acquired through their studies, documentation that is also seen as important in a life-long learning perspective. Third, it is seen as a relevant tool for employers with the subsequent aim of stimulating a more flexible and mobile workforce.
Within the literature on learning outcomes, there is considerable disagreement about how the concept of learning outcomes should be understood and measured (Eisner, 1979; Allen, 1996; Melton, 1996; Hargreaves & Moore, 2000; Harden, 2002; Adam, 2004; Prøitz, 2010). In principle, one could distinguish between two fundamental different views on learning outcomes (Prøitz, 2010). According to Gagné (1974), learning outcomes could be specified precisely allowing for more concrete measurement of what has been learnt, not least tracing the ‘added value’ of attending higher education by focusing on changes in knowledge and skills over time (Arum & Roksa, 2011). The implication is that learning outcomes should be understood as focusing on the clear results of learning, that learning outcomes can be prescribed, and that they are assessable. Eisner (2005), on the other hand, emphasises that a learning outcome also could be understood as what you end up with—intended or not—after a given period of study. This emphasises a process-oriented view, where learning outcomes may be open-ended, but with limited possibilities for assessment. These different understandings imply that the links between learning outcomes and quality assurance are not straightforward, especially with respect to what assessment should include, and how assessment should be undertaken.

If we add qualification frameworks into this equation the complexity increases: by considering the whole study program, we move from learning outcomes as a concept related to the individual student to an understanding of learning outcomes as an organizational responsibility. This is essentially what quality assurance has been occupied with throughout its history. In a number of countries accreditations and assessments have been focused on the quality of the study program, how it has been designed, and how program intentions and aspirations are implemented in practice. In this way much of external quality assurance has been tightly linked to the curriculum—to the ‘academic plan’ for how teaching and learning should take place, and the procedures in place for its implementation (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Such a plan can be expected to include: decisions about what, why and how students learn; ways to determine whether students have learned what they are supposed to; and methods of using this information to improve the plan (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). With the introduction of qualification frameworks in various countries, one can also note a broadened understanding of curricula, not only including the academic content and specific subject matter (Stefani 2009), but also ideas as to how student learning should take place, and the processes by which this is facilitated and assessed (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Biggs’ (1999) concept of ‘constructive alignment’—the linking of study design, learning activities and their evaluation—can be said to be an instrumental contribution in this respect. The idea of constructive alignment can
be related to both an open ended and more results-oriented understanding of learning outcomes. In principle, constructive alignment can be seen as a very linear and rational way to design a given study program. In handbooks on curriculum and study program design the concept of constructive alignment is often used as means to propose a ‘logical model’ of curriculum development, which assumes the learning content is always known in advance, and that it is therefore quite straightforward to design a curriculum to match (see, for example: Stefani, 2009: 50). This is an approach to learning outcomes that is closely aligned with the political ambitions of qualification frameworks (Adam, 2004) and learning outcomes (Avis, 2000); it presents the learning outcome as a pre-defined objective about what a successful student is expected to do after completing a specific type of training. The learning outcome should be formulated in to underline what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning (Kennedy et al., 2006; Kennedy, 2007). At the same time, one could argue that constructive alignment may include dimensions which are more related to an open ended understanding of learning outcomes, such as how interactions between teachers and students take place, and the social climate surrounding the learning process. These dimensions relate more to theories of change, where the learning process and social interactions are seen as key for understanding outcomes (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Engeström, 2008).

To sum up, the relationship between learning outcomes and external quality assurance can be understood in different ways, especially related to the level of learning outcomes to be assessed, and how learning outcomes are understood. By combining these dimensions, we can outline different ways in which learning outcomes may be linked to external quality assurance (Table 1).

Table 1: Possible links between learning outcomes and how these can be assessed through external quality assurance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual-level assessment</th>
<th>Organization-level assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of ‘learning outcomes’</td>
<td>Predefined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended</td>
<td>Attitudes, values and beliefs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Table 1 could be criticized for employing a compartmentalized understanding of learning outcomes and their assessment, we argue that it
Assessment initiatives and quality assurance provides a basic conceptual framework for exploring how current external quality assurance schemes are incorporating learning outcomes into their assessment procedures.

**Tales from the field: How external quality assurance addresses learning outcomes**

**What has been the historical role of learning outcomes in external quality assurance?**

Over the last two decades external quality assurance has become one of the highest priority areas of education policy development around the world (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). In various countries we have witnessed the development of (typically) national quality assurance schemes intended to control or enhance the quality of higher education. These schemes have often involved the establishment of special (independent) agencies charged with implementing governmental actions in quality assurance. Following this, we have seen various evaluation methods and forms being introduced and applied. Methods such as subject assessments, quality audits, benchmarking, and accreditation (to mention just a few of the most central approaches) have become familiar features within the sector (Stensaker, 2008). As part of the increased internationalization and globalization of higher education, accreditation has also been seen as the preferred method for assuring the quality of the educational provision.

However, the increased emphasis on accreditation does not necessarily imply that the methods involved focus particularly on outcomes and results. On the contrary, and as underlined by Ewell (2008), even in the United States many accreditation schemes have relied heavily upon input and process indicators. In Europe one could argue that the build-up of national and European external quality assurance schemes traditionally relied predominantly on process and input variables and indicators (Stensaker, 2008). Hence, a strong focus on results and (learning) outcomes cannot be said to have characterized external quality assurance.

A glance at recent activities and stated aspirations of external quality assurance bodies, working at the international level and from selected countries, suggests that learning outcome approaches are being much more closely integrated into external quality assurance, especially in Europe, the United States and in Australia. In this section we have selected a range of countries who have established themselves as leaders and innovators in quality assurance, most of them undergoing major reviews of the external quality assurance processes in the last five years. Key documentation for these country cases, such as accreditation and quality assurance agency strategy documents, progress reports, as well as academic literature in
response to policy reforms, has been reviewed to develop an overview of the changing position and role of learning outcomes within a range of quality assurance systems.

**European developments in external quality assurance**

Perhaps unsurprisingly in light of the Bologna process, learning outcomes have a particularly prominent and clear role among European quality assurance bodies such as European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA). ENQA disseminates advice and good practice for European higher education, notably through their Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) now on a third edition (ENQA, 2009)¹. ENQA has taken a leading role in developing quality assurance in Europe, and has shaped a regional quality assurance block with influence beyond Europe (Kinser, 2011). Adam (2008) noted that the ESG identify learning outcomes as key reference points for quality assurance. In their ENQA report on the role of outcomes in quality assurance, Adamson et al. make it clear that an outcomes approach is seen as the way forward, and one offering multiple advantages:

> The importance of learning outcomes will increase for several reasons. Firstly, learning outcomes make qualifications more transparent for students. Then, the range of graduates is becoming wider and thanks to learning outcomes, employers may have a better understanding of the acquired knowledge, skills and competences in order to recruit the most suitable candidate. Learning outcomes benefit for quality assurance as they increase transparency and comparability between qualification standards. (Adamson et al. 2010: 4)

The latest ENQA guidelines (ENQA, 2009) position learning outcomes as a vital tool: “The realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programs have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes...” (2009: 16). Learning outcomes are also used as primary reference points for quality assurance and assessment: “The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include: [the] development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes” (2009: 17) and “Student assessment procedures are expected to: be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives”.

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¹ The Berlin communiqué of September 2003 established the need for ‘an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance’ for the European higher education area and tasked ENQA with developing these (ENQA, 2009).
In this way, the ESG positions learning outcomes as key external quality assurance tools for both the institutional and program levels. Outcomes are also expected to play a prominent role in the information provided by institutions: “higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide information about the programmes they are offering, the intended learning outcomes of these, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, and the learning opportunities available to their students” (ENQA, 2009: 19).

The report from the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education, notes that they have been “advocating a stronger focus on learning outcomes in quality assurance procedures since 2006” (ECA, 2013: 7). A recent ECA report aims to clarify and guide the use of learning outcomes in European accreditation. While making the point that setting specific learning outcomes is primarily a task for institutions, the ECA state they have a role in actively promoting and strengthening the position of learning outcomes in accreditation (ECA, 2013). In elaborating how outcomes should be taken up, they set out seven principles, emphasising that outcomes should be prominent features at the programs and institution level, with institutions establishing clear processes to meet specified learning outcomes and assess their fulfilment. They also specify that learning outcomes must be “defined in clear and concrete terms” and linked to ways that “students are expected to be able to demonstrate and describe observable abilities which can be assessed...[where] methods of assessing learning outcomes are results-oriented and clearly described”.

It seems both the ECA and ENQA are moving from a position of general support, to more specific, concrete and detailed guidelines on how learning outcomes should be implemented in quality assurance and accreditation. Both state they wish to promote a greater, more consistent role for learning outcomes. While they stress expectations of concrete and fairly directly assessable types of learning outcomes, exactly what is to be measured (e.g. grades, engagement, satisfaction, skills, employment outcomes) is not specified at this European level. Instead the stress is on establishing initial standards and consistency, ‘alignment’ (with intended learning outcomes followed up in teaching effort and assessment approaches) and improved information and transparency for students and the public.

ENQA also tracks the uptake of learning outcomes via surveys of European quality assurance agencies. In their 2012 report (the third wave of this survey) they found an increased use of, and focus on using and validating learning outcomes among national agencies, with learning outcomes highly ranked as an approach for institutional and program oriented activity (Grifol et al., 2012). While the majority (71.4%) of agencies reported covering learning outcomes among their activities, a smaller share (42.9%) report
effective mechanisms for this area. One explanation may be that in the absence of developed national qualification frameworks it is hard for quality assurance agencies to develop specific approaches to monitor and assess learning outcomes. While agency uptake of learning outcomes is evident, the national agencies report a wide variety of strategies to attempt to validate the actual learning outcomes achieved, leading ENQA to conclude that finding ‘best practice’ approaches to measuring the achievement of program and individual learning outcomes is the next ‘frontier’ for quality assurance efforts (Grifol et al., 2012: 18).

United Kingdom developments in external quality assurance

The United Kingdom has been developing a new quality system in recent years. The new Quality Code updates the ‘academic infrastructure’ established in the early 1990s, and already including a framework for higher education qualifications, subject benchmark statements and guidelines for program specifications to describe the aims and learning outcomes of each program of study (Brown, 2011). This reflects the relatively long-standing role of learning outcomes in United Kingdom higher education, but the new system of quality assurance increases their prominence and specificity, via an updated Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, where qualifications are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies, with Threshold Standards defining the “minimum acceptable level of achievement a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for the award” (QAA, 2012). In this way, expected minimum learning outcomes become a stronger feature, with an expected role in program design, teaching and learning quality, and assessment. The QAA state that “the learning outcomes for the program of study map directly to the summative assessment, with the assessment methods being appropriate to offer every student an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes irrespective of how and where the student has studied” (QAA, 2012). The code stresses the role of outcomes in enhancing the consistency of learning outcomes achieved in qualifications across the country, and the need for alignment between outcomes and assessment, as well as this interest in students’ final level of performance.

The previous United Kingdom quality system had seen few major changes since 1991, relied heavily on institutional audits and was focused on assuring the management of academic standards and learning, largely via input and process features (Brown, 2011). Under the new system, reviewers judge institutions in terms of ‘threshold academic standards’, public information, student learning opportunities and enhancement of learning. The role of external examiners remains a prominent feature in the United Kingdom, although the Quality Code seems to hint at a ‘downgrading’ of the external
examiner role, despite it previously being seen as one of the most direct ways of monitoring student performance and outcomes (Bloxham & Price, 2013). Despite the long-term presence of learning outcomes in the academic infrastructure, they remain little used in direct or indirect measures of student outcomes. Kohoutek (2014) suggests that this is because the new QAA approach remains largely focused on monitoring institutional performance, while measureable learning outcomes are typically products of specific programs. The same study (Khoutek, 2014) points out that while learning outcomes are now almost universal in module and program designs in United Kingdom universities, many academic staff remain skeptical about the role of learning outcomes in developing high-quality learning experiences, and have relatively low awareness about Bologna and European frameworks. Hence, in the United Kingdom case while learning outcomes approaches are widely established in formal processes and program design, there are few measures of actual outcomes. Their implementation at the institutional level seems to still be working through in terms of assessment processes.

Swedish developments in external quality assurance

An unusually direct approach to learning outcomes can be found in Sweden. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education established a model for external quality assurance for 2011–17 focused on evaluating outcomes based on students’ work, rather than intended outcomes, processes or other quality indicators. It marks an attempt to measure outcomes more ‘directly’, in contrast to traditional indirect assessments of aims or processes (Arehag et al., 2013).

The new model was seen as a response to critiques of the previous quality assurance system, notably a lack of transparency and weak alignment with Bologna (Adamson et al., 2010). To establish this new system of ‘results focused’ quality assurance, the definition of quality was taken to mean meeting the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO) set out in qualification descriptors in the national Higher Education Ordinance. This meant “the question the new quality assurance model had to answer simply became: Do programs ensure that students achieve these learning outcomes?” (Adamson et al., 2010). The system involves the assessment of achieved learning outcomes through a sample of students’ work, along with a student experience aspect based on student and alumni surveys, which also include outcomes in terms of occupational relevance and employability; institutions also prepare a self-evaluation report.

In a review of the implementation so far of this quality assurance approach, Adamson et al. (2013) identify several methodological challenges in the direct assessment of learning outcomes based on students’ work, notably appropriate sampling, time-consuming procedures, and the need to
select a sub-set of ILOs to evaluate. As there is no inclusion of teaching and learning activities a more fundamental question is also raised by Adamson et al. (2013) about the extent to which ILOs represent student performance or the institution’s performance improving the student, the latter being needed to inspire confidence that the system “evaluates educational quality and not student quality”.

Arehag et al. (2013) have investigated the implications of this new model so far in engineering education, based on experiences at Chalmers University of Technology. They note that the current adaption process started back in 2007 with new regulations for degrees including more specified goals to be demonstrated by graduates. Chalmers University developed program goal statements, curricula and surveys to track the goals and report seeing a greater focus placed on final degree projects, as these are now assessed in more depth. Respondents noted that certain common outcomes, notably ethics and the ability to “identify and formulate complex problems”, have proved difficult to elaborate as learning outcomes, due to challenges interpreting what this general skill would mean in a specific field, and how it can be assessed (Arehaug et al., 2013).

Both Adamson (2010) and Arehaug et al. (2013) report some perceived improvements in teaching linked to the adaptation to new evaluations, and efforts to review existing teaching and learning practices. However, they question if such improvement in balance with the very extensive quality work required by the new system. There has also been criticism of the process being costly, relying too much on final degree projects as an unreliable quality indicator, and for its failure to accord with ENQA’s quality assurance requirements (Arehaug et al., 2013).

United States developments in external quality assurance

Higher education accreditation and quality assurance were traditionally the responsibility of regional bodies in the United States, who dealt with local institutions while a number of national bodies oversaw specific subject areas (Eaton, 2012). This led to a decentralized, complex system, with distinct approaches for external assurance for various professional or disciplinary areas (Drechsler Sharp, 2011). The role of federal organisations has tended to be limited, although the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) plays a key role in developing accreditation standards and ensuring regional quality assurance agencies have suitable approaches in place (Eaton 2012). CHEA has embraced aspects of a learning outcomes approach for several years, and in 2007 released a statement with the Association of American Colleges and Universities stating that “Accrediting organizations have played a significant role in advancing the assessment of learning outcomes and must continue to do so while encouraging institutions to set the
highest possible standards” (AACU & CHEA, 2008). CHEA has also established an annual award for “Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes”, reflecting what they see as the increasingly important role of learning outcomes in higher education accountability and effectiveness (CHEA, 2104).

American higher education has a relatively long history of attempts to measure learning outcomes through student surveys and standardized tests (Banta, 2010). The latest wave of interest in learning outcomes as part of accreditation and quality assurance is seen as a response to the agenda set by the Spellings Commission in 2006, which demanded that universities demonstrate their contribution to employability and high-quality educational outcomes in a more transparent and consistent way (Ewell, 2009; Kuh & Ewell, 2010). Banta (2010: 182) notes that “Standardized tests of generic skills such as writing and critical thinking were seen as the best mechanism for addressing the Commission’s recommendations” and “many universities adopted some form of standardized testing, allowing scores and value added performance to be compared”. As Ewell (2009) describes “The central leitmotifs of this new accountability environment are transparency and learning outcomes. Colleges and universities are being asked to disclose more and more about academic results and are responding in kind”. This renewed demand for direct evidence of student achievement seems to have contributed to increased federal-level activity via CHEA and others, in the interest of protecting the student consumers and ensuring minimum standards in all regions (Ewell, 2009). There have been a range of recent initiatives and projects demonstrating an increased commitment to learning outcomes, including the Lumina Foundation’s Tuning United States project (applying the European Tuning method to selected subjects and states) and the recently established National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (Drechsler Sharp et al., 2011).

While the direction of travel in the United States appears to show learning outcomes taking a bigger role, the form this will take seems uncertain. A range of higher education skills tests are relatively well established in the United States, including the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) test, and regional initiatives such as California’s Student Experience in the Research University Survey (SERU-S) (Douglass et al., 2012). Large scale student and graduate surveys have also been in place for almost 50 years, used in benchmarking, institutional accreditation and accountability (Kuh & Ewell, 2010). However most of these instruments have come in for criticism regarding their reliability and validity as measures of learning outcome (Douglass et al, 2012).

Drechsler Sharp et al. (2011: 482) note that “Efforts to promote and assess learning remain fragmented, despite the evident benefits of partnering intentionally across the academy to create learning outcomes”, leading to current
demands for more consistent approaches. Kuh and Ewell conclude that “Accreditation is the primary vehicle for quality assurance in American higher education and the major driver of learning outcomes assessment... While the focus of regional accreditation is improvement, external accountability forces are shaping and sharpening its expectations to press for more extensive assessment of student learning and using the results for improvement and making institutional performance more transparent.” (2010: 23). However, the diversity of institutions involved in external assurance, and the range of long-established approaches to measuring student performance indirectly (through student surveys) or directly (through standardized testing) creates an environment where the role and shape of learning outcomes in external quality assurance is as yet uncertain.

**Australian developments in external quality assurance**

In 2011, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) brought roles for regulation and quality assurance previously conducted through nine agencies under a single federal body, as part of a major higher education reform following from a 2008 Review Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). These reforms were argued to be necessary for the expected expansion in higher education and to establish more consistent national quality standards (Shah, 2011). The new accreditation, quality assurance and regulatory framework were focused on improving the quality of outcomes while creating pressure for expansion and greater uptake of non-traditional students (Shah, 2011). The system is based around defined minimum ‘threshold’ academic standards, linked to levels set out in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). TEQSA is charged with ensuring stated course learning outcomes specify outcomes suitable for the relevant AQF level and qualification type and must “assess whether the design of all the components of the course will support achievement of the learning outcomes” (Australian Government, 2013). In language similar to that found in the European case, TEQSA stress alignment with national regulations and constructive alignment within courses as quality issues. The Australian Government has also indicated an interest in developing new indicators for teaching and learning which can be linked to performance-related funding, although this remains under discussion (Shah & Nair, 2012). A further significant change is the launch of the ‘My University’ website, publishing information on institutional performance on key measures (Shah et al., 2011) and again reflecting a renewed focus on outcomes for direct use by students and applicants.

TEQSA’s new framework has been described as a major shift in the quality assurance approach, introducing a ‘compliance based’ model in contrast to the previous ‘improvement-led, fitness-for-purpose’ framework,
which involved an self-evaluation phase where universities identified areas for improvement and quality processes before external audit (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Judgments about quality will now to be based on externally set threshold standards (minimum learning outcomes determined nationally). Shah and Jarzabkowski (2013) argue that the increased power of the national regulator and centrally developed standards could lead to a system which undermines innovation in curriculum design, assessments and teaching, if efforts focus on meeting external standards and dealing with audit processes.

To support the implementation of the new threshold standards, the Australian Government commissioned the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) (now the Office of Learning and Teaching) to run demonstration projects to identify and develop Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) covering the minimum discipline-specific knowledge, skills and capabilities expected from graduates in selected areas. Initial reports are available from a few specific disciplines on how this has worked so far. Jones et al. (2012) describe the extensive process of consultation and development that has resulted in a new Science Standards Statement, “a generic high-level statement of Bachelor of Science threshold learning outcomes”, which is to be further adapted to specific subjects. They note that while the statement was their main output, “less tangible outcomes of the project include an enhanced focus on learning outcomes as a major tool for curriculum review and design” (Jones et al. 2012: 107), suggesting how developing disciplinary learning outcomes can be valuable. However, they also note challenges in finding ways to ‘overtly demonstrate’ if students meet TLOs, along with concerns that a grounding in ethics, methods and philosophy of science (which are agreed to be vital outcomes) are rarely assessed and are taught implicitly as part of overall programs. They also suggest that the TLOs developed in the statement are unsuitable for direct public or student information, where a simplified version would be needed. In further efforts towards implementing the TLOs, good practice guides are being developed (Yucel, 2013) with suggested resources on developing TLOs and examples of best practice in teaching and assessing TLOs.

Brawley et al. (2011) consider the implications of the new history framework, and express concerns that disciplinary communities may not be sufficiently involved in identifying and developing learning outcomes, particularly if TLOs developed by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2010 are not be used and instead TESQA impose new standards and outcomes. They also report on the After Standards project (ALTC, 2011), administered by three Australian universities, which aims to build disciplinary capacity needed to meet the challenge of developing learning outcomes and understanding how to work with and assess them (Brawley et al., 2011).
These disciplinary cases suggest that the process of settling in the new Australian quality regime will take some time, despite policy makers’ interest in more direct measures of outcome (whether student surveys or measures of performance benchmarked to the new qualification framework) which could be linked to performance related funding. The focus of activity around new minimum learning outcomes appears to be largely at the institutional level for now, requiring significant effort within disciplines and programs to establish new outcomes and assessments. This reflects a significant departure from past Australian quality assurance practice, and moves to align with international developments of qualification frameworks.

Discussion and reflections

Towards integration of external quality assurance and learning outcomes?

There is little doubt that learning outcomes are gaining prominence in the efforts of international quality assurance and accreditation bodies, and in national frameworks and assurance schemes. The introduction of new outcome-based assurance initiatives often comes as part of a wholesale review or efforts to improve quality assurance on a national level, with a corresponding focus on new national bodies, instruments or standards.

The cases reviewed above also reveal that outcomes are used more than simply as ‘planning tools’ for new programs, and their presence in formal program plans (often mandated under new qualification frameworks) is expected to lead to an increased focus on, and action in, teaching quality. While not all of the cases make explicit reference to principles for alignment, it is present in many cases, where outcomes are presented as ‘tools’ to better link intended outcomes, processes and assessment. There is less sign of outcome approaches focused on providing direct information for employers, although concerns about the relevance of graduate skills to employability is a backdrop to many of the reforms.

In terms of shifts in the types of outcomes built in to quality assurance, there is a clear preference for measurable outcomes and some level of pre-definition, typically via linked minimum or threshold standards, or other subject or national benchmarks. There are also signs of outcome-based assessment being introduced in a way which creates new opportunities for program-specific evaluation of outcomes and quality, although institutional evaluation remains the focus in many cases for now. When it comes to using relatively direct measures of student performance, via satisfaction or experience surveys, sampled work or skills testing, the quality assurance systems show an increased interest in these options but they have not moved entirely away from process and input factors; most retain aspects of institutional
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The new quality assurance efforts mark an extension of the range of evidence gathered, rather than a replacement, with the possible exception of Sweden where the assessment of student projects is unusually strongly weighted in evaluations. Based on this, it can be argued that external quality assurance agencies are increasingly covering all four squares found in Table 1.

Several of our cases suggest similarities in the background pressures necessitating, or legitimising, these new approaches. In the United Kingdom and Australian cases, and arguably the United States case, the need to measure outcomes more concretely is explicitly linked to concerns for transparency, comparability and credibility raised by recent reviews of higher education. As Adam has noted, outcomes approaches offer obvious advantages over traditional quality measures on all of these fronts, in avoiding the need for uncertain ‘process’ proxy measures (2004: 7). Linked to these common demands for transparency are often pressures related to ongoing massification or changes in funding, with universities needing to deliver more, more explicitly, and to make a step change in the information they provide to the public and students about the demonstrable quality and outcomes of their programs.

Perhaps because of this increased concern about transparency and demonstrable outcomes, there is also a suggestion from these cases that learning outcomes can accompany a renewed focus on quality assurance activities led from the federal or, in Europe, regional, level. In Australia and the United States it seems that federal agencies are leading efforts to develop learning outcomes approaches, and are gaining new roles while doing so, while in the United Kingdom and Swedish cases the role for institutional self-evaluation seems to have been diminished.

The unresolved measurement challenge

While learning outcomes are increasingly integrated into quality assurance procedures, the main challenge for institutions seems to be how they can and should be measured. Banta (2010) has noted that many United States institutions have become skeptical about measuring learning outcomes, with long-running evidence of fundamental problems with surveys and skills tests, and more recent evidence that tracking such outputs may not be linked to any clear improvement in quality. She suggests that today’s academics may have to re-learn the flaws and limitations in such approaches. In the United States there has been a particularly fierce debate around popular tools for assessing outcomes; direct skills tests such as the CLA have been severely critiqued in terms of validity (Lodge & Bonsanquet, 2013) and in analyses showing little improvement in student performance during higher education (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Student experience surveys have been critiqued as lacking
validity (see Porter, 2011) and by Douglass, et al. (2012) who suggest the ‘learning outcomes race’ to establish dominant forms of measurement is leading to an excessive focus on standardized outcome tests at the expense of forms of information more geared to improvement.

In Australia, the idea of using student experience or satisfaction measures not just in quality assurance but as an input for new teaching and learning performance-based funding is heavily criticized (Shah & Nair, 2012) as an ambiguous quality indicator, which could also drive up inequality in the system. Lodge and Bonsanquet also suggest that the renewed international interest in measuring student learning, which they see as particularly prominent in Australia and United States, is driven by concerns for accountability, but that the evidence available for most measures of outcomes and value-added performance are “grossly inadequate” (Lodge & Bonsanquet, 2013: 15). The Swedish experience of very direct measurement of students’ performance in final projects, as noted above, has also raised questions about how far any achievement of outcomes can fairly be attributed to the influence of the program on the student, rather than to the student (Adamson, 2010).

How will learning outcome approaches impact the improvement or accountability balance?

These debates around the kinds of outcome measurements to be pursued are often related to bigger questions about the ultimate focus and role of new forms of quality assurance. Dill and Beerkens (2013) suggest that “the continued search for universal, valid measures of academic value added, particularly at the university level, is similar to a quest for the Holy Grail… The evidence thus far suggests this pursuit is as likely to distort or diminish academic standards as to assure them”. Based on a recent (2013) review of several new quality assurance systems Dill and Beerkens revisits the long running debates around the validity of potential measures, pointing out that this perennial problem becomes particularly acute when the mode of assurance is heavily focused on centralized regulation or marketised mechanisms. They warn this might limit the room for professional self-regulation and ongoing quality improvement (Dill & Beerkens, 2013).

Indeed, several authors point out how the search for new measurement tools often sits at the meeting point, or tension point, between quality efforts focusing on accountability or those focusing on improvement. Ewell and Kuh note that “some observers see these two purposes – improvement and accountability – if not at odds, at least in tension with each other” (2010: 23) and argue that a balance needs to be maintained in quality assurance approaches, including those measuring outcomes, that leaves room for improvement. In several of the cases looked at here, questions are raised
about outcome-based measures emphasising compliance more than improvement, as found in the Australian case (Shah & Nair, 2012) United Kingdom case (Brown, 2011) and Swedish case (Arehag et al., 2013). A related concern is that learning outcome measures may shift the assessment balance too far from formative to summative forms. Applying learning outcomes is thought to create pressure for more summative assessment (Kohoutek, 2014), and Jessop et al. (2013) suggest that having to develop outcome-based program specifications is reducing opportunities for formative assessment, despite the evidence it is crucial to learning quality.

Shah and Nair (2012) relate this same tension to the shift from using student surveys as a feedback process that helps institutions identify problem areas and gives students a voice on quality, to systems where surveys are mandatory and play a more prominent role in rating institutions’ performance and even funding. Questions are raised about the extent to which the interest in standardized outcome tests can be reconciled with the tendency for information to be more useful in improvement if it is tailored to specific areas and gathered without attendant performance pressure. Jessop et al. (2012), referring to the strengthened role of program descriptors, note that new quality assurance processes risk becoming more “about measurable, public indicators of quality, rather than the more messy business of learning and teaching. They are product indicators, built on rational and linear presuppositions about ‘outcomes’, rather than process indicators” (Jessop et al., 2012: 145).

Conclusion

The trends noted in this chapter are still early indications of how learning outcomes approaches may impact on higher education. Numerous initiatives are underway, and while we see signs of a closer integration of learning outcomes in external quality assurance, with attempts to cover more of the quadrants sketched out in Table 1, there remain many heated debates about the form, relevance and usefulness of learning outcomes. While critical voices are easy to find with respect to the applicability of current learning outcomes approaches to higher education (Brown, 2013), others suggest that learning outcomes need to be even more specific and relate to specified subject areas (Dill & Beerkens, 2013) to overcome current problems of measures which are too generalized (Hou, 2012; Lodge & Bonsa, 2013). Culver and Warfvinge (2013) also see a potential benefit of learning outcomes in requiring a much more active input from academics, in working out how to apply them within institutions. There is also recent evidence that, where learning outcomes are used to encourage or require more aligned courses, this may lead to improved student outcomes via deeper learning approaches (Thota & Whitfield, 2010, Wang et al., 2013). Improvement at
the institutional level is still very much dependent on the interaction between institutions and external quality assurance. In the worst case, quality assurance approaches may limit opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

Hence, from initial and early evidence of how institutions and disciplinary areas are grappling with implementing outcome-based approaches, in response to quality assurance, there are clear signs that it is at the institutional and subject level that many of the methodological and practical challenges around learning outcomes approaches will appear and have to be resolved. Even where well-developed national qualification frameworks are already in place, there is still work to be done to unpack and develop learning outcomes for each program.

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HELOs and student centred learning – where’s the link?

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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; ENQUA, 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 learning process and fail to engage with more dynamic, unpredictable and relational aspects of learning (Biesta, 2009; Hussey & Smith, 2008; Smyth & Dow, 1998). Ramsden (1992) cautions that the influence of learning outcomes on pedagogical practices and enhancement depends on how they are applied, as particularly strict and inflexible approaches may fragment and restrict the overall learning process. Entwistle (2009) acknowledges the risk that ‘targeted understanding’ approaches, such as HELOs, may encourage students to take a ‘tick box’ approach to learning.

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

Adam (2008, p. 13) argues that student-centred learning necessitates the use of learning outcomes as the only logical approach, as it produces an automatic focus on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments. Others argue that outcome approaches mark a shift away from traditional teacher-centred practice (Prøitz, 2010), signal a general focus on more active learning and less traditional teaching. This lack of clarity reflects the long-standing and varied roots of student- or learner-centred ideas. A key starting point for these ideas is Dewey’s experiential learning. ‘Student-centred learning’ is widely attributed to Carl Rogers’ perspectives on psychology, flourishing and education (Brandes & Ginnis, 1996; O’Neil & McMahon, 2005). These perspectives challenged the traditional, authoritative role of educators, the passivity of learners, and views of education as the ‘transmission’ of expert-defined knowledge. The term student-centred has also been used to describe teachers’ conceptions of learning, as a contrast to traditional teacher- and content-focused understandings (Kember, 1997; 2009). The related term of ‘learner-centredness’, which is widely used in education policy, signals an intention to move away from traditional practices, and features prominently in education reforms, particularly donor-sponsored projects in developing countries (Schweisfurth, 2011). These psychological, pedagogical and policy perspectives encourage very varied ideas about what student-centred learning is for or can do.

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

Some versions of student-centred learning seem much thinner, implying changes in teaching activity or formats, whilst neglecting more substantive changes associated with the idea. Using student-centredness synonymously with active learning may not only neglect but undercut more comprehensive definitions which include choice in learning and shifts of power in the teacher–student relationship (O’Neil & McMahon, 2005). Student-centredness may require ongoing negotiation between the teacher and student in all key learning decisions, specifically ‘What is to be learnt, how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgements are made and by whom these judgements are made’ (Gibbs, 1995, p.1, cited in O’Neil & McMahon, 2005, p. 28). Tannney (2014) highlights how student choice and power are often overlooked in discussions of student-centred learning.
suggesting that humanist ideas of holistic approaches, empowerment and emancipation are often absent in more ‘pedagogic’ discussions of the phenomena.

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

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

4 | IDENTIFYING KEY FEATURES OF STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING

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

TABLE I  Mapping key features of student-centred learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key issues</th>
<th>Defining features of student-centred learning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is meant by learning?</td>
<td>Type of learning: Deep learning and understanding (Lea et al., 2003), powerful or transformational learning (Barr &amp; Tagg, 1995) active engagement with knowledge (Kember, 2009; Ramsden, 1992).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature of learning: Knowledge not ‘out there’ but constructed by/within students, not ‘transmitted’ by teacher (Barr &amp; Tagg, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice/activities involved?</td>
<td>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 &amp; Tagg, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What roles are expected?</td>
<td>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 &amp; Tagg, 1995; Wright, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of the teacher: Designer of environment that supports learning (Barr &amp; Tagg, 1995) and facilitator of learning working with students as catalysts/advisers (Wright, 2011); empower students and develop the individual student (Barr &amp; Tagg, 1995; Wright, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there implications for power and choice?</td>
<td>Shifts in power: Shift away from teaching to learning encourages power to move from the teacher to the student (Barr &amp; Tagg, 1995); empowerment and emancipation (Tangney, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choice/agency: Choice of what to study and how to study it (Gibbs, 1995; Burnard, 1999, both as cited in O’Neil &amp; McMahon).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 ‘deep’ learning, were 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 ‘generic’ skills 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 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 where the boundaries of ‘core outcomes’ were easier to define.

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 making 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 students 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 specific 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 lectures 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 were often felt to be limited by resource constraints, not teacher attitudes or a lack of LO approaches supporting them. Teachers wanting to make use of more varied and active approaches in teaching repeatedly suggested that this was constrained by resources (class sizes and formats, teacher time for preparation and contact). They also suggested
that students’ unwillingness to engage with tasks that did not count towards a final grade made more activities or summative tasks a challenge.

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 think marks are a barrier to learning, and I still think they are, but in some cases because students will focus on what mark they will get rather than what they are learning and the skills they were developing. (EN1STEMLecturer/leader)

6.3 | HELOS and issues of power and choice

The design of degree programmes and balancing compulsory and optional modules were related to teachers’ roles and issues of power and choice. Although having some choice about courses was important to students, it seemed that neither they nor teachers felt that students should have more power in determining the overall shape and content of degrees. Students and teachers suggested that a key part of the teacher’s role was to understand the ‘big picture’ of a discipline or professional area and guide students into it. Teachers underlined this selection and prioritisation of content and knowledge as central to their role.

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

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

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

7 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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

There are signs that LOs encourage a focus on transparency and alignment, safeguarding against weaker teaching practices or challenging 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 reworking 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


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Appendices

Appendix I:
Table summarising the publications: aims, perspectives, data and key findings.

Appendix II:
Interview guides for students, teachers & leaders (English translations)

Appendix III:
Confirmation regarding co-authorship and contribution to each publication ('medforfattererklæring').
Appendix I: Table summarising the publications, aims, perspectives, data and key findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key topic</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
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<td>Perspectives</td>
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<td>Key findings</td>
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The table above provides a summary of the publications, their aims, perspectives, data, and key findings. Each row in the table represents a different publication, and the columns indicate the different aspects that are being summarised.
## Leadership interviewees (deans, study programme leader, senior administrators)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impression and experience of Programme/module plans (plans, LO descriptions)</th>
<th>Management responsibility / functions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you remember the introduction of LO based approaches to planning courses/modules? What expectations did you have? Have your views changed over time?</td>
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<td>Has the role of LOs in planning and conducting HE programmes changed over time? In what way?</td>
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<td>Does the use of LOs influence the way courses are planned/ or the subject material covered? What other important influences are there?</td>
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<td>Have you been involved in formulating module/course descriptions? In what way? If you were not involved, do you think the LOS would be different if you had been? How?</td>
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<td>How is the process of developing and updating subject/module descriptions organized?</td>
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<td>Who is responsible for this process?</td>
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<td>What are LOs used for in the courses you oversee?</td>
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<td>What conditions must be in place for LOs to be realized?</td>
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<td>To what extent are the conditions needed for LOs to be realized in place?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the advantages / disadvantages of a LO approach?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the introduction of LOs led to changes in the role of leaders/managers? In what way?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Teaching plans/approach and LOs</th>
<th>links between leadership and teaching?</th>
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<tr>
<td>If you were to consider LOs as a kind of steering or management tool, which of the following terms do you think fits:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic management tool (for better quality and improving completion rates)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tool for increased administrative/ management information (for use in on-going course administration)</td>
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<td>A symbolic academic and administrative tool (without any clear link to academic content)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A tool that supports and protects the rights of students / staff / the institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you characterize the link between the program specifications / module descriptions plans and the overall strategy of your department/institution?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Evaluation/Assessment and LOs</th>
<th>links between management and assessment?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Are LO descriptions used in your management or leadership work? How, examples? (any challenges?)</td>
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<td>do you have any experiences of the way changes to degree programme planning/curricula can change the ways you can manage and lead programmes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Any specific challenges or changes related to using LOs in these ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do LOs change the way you can interpret or use information from assessments? How?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Results information and use of results data (performance information, the link between steering / management and teaching / learning / assessment)</th>
<th>Use of performance information as a steering/ management tool?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are data / results gathered in relation to any specific LOs? Which ones? Why these?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How is that data used? In any specific ways? How? (accountability / to check external relevance)? To further refine/update programme?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What kind of information is used to follow up on LOs? Information from student evaluations, indicators of completion/progress – has the kind of measures/results used changed over time? How?</td>
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<td><strong>Teachers/ Lecturers</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Impression and experience of Programme/module plans (plans, LO descriptions)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Changes in the role of the teacher?</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Do you remember the introduction of LO based approaches to planning courses/modules? What expectations did you have in relation to LOs?</td>
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<td>- Does the use of LOs influence the way courses are planned/ or the subject material covered? What other important influences are there?</td>
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<td>- Have you been involved in formulating module/course descriptions? In what way? If you were not involved, do you think the LOS would be different if you had been? How?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What are LOs used for in your programme/modules – how are they used?</td>
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<td>- What conditions must be in place for LOs to work/ be realized?</td>
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<td>- To what extent are the conditions needed for LOs to be realized in place?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What are the advantages / disadvantages of a LO approach?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Has the introduction of LOs involved any changes in the role of lecturers/teachers? In what way?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching plans/approach and LOs</strong></td>
<td><strong>link between plans and teaching / learning?</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Does using LO formulations influence or direct the content of your teaching / courses? How / why / why not? (Do you think that working with outcome-based approaches can contribute to greater flexibility, accessibility, relevance in teaching / education? Alternatively, might it limit the teaching and learning process – control it too much?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Do you see LOs as minimum standards or goals to stretch for/challenge students?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- To what extent do you think that there is a clear link between the outcomes described for your courses and the assessment/evaluation activities used? Has this link changed over time?</td>
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<td>- To what extent do you think that this kind of formulation of learning goals/outcomes can enhance or improve students' learning? (when/how can this work and when/how can it not work)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation/Assessment and LOs</strong></td>
<td><strong>links between teaching and assessment?</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How do you assess your students? examples?</td>
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<td>- What kinds of guidelines do you use for different types of assessment, such as criteria for ratings/grades? Where does this guidance come from? How they are used?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Do the students get feedback on how they are doing in relation to LOs? Do they get feedback during, or after a course?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Results information and use of results data (performance information, the link between steering / management and teaching / learning / assessment)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Use of performance information as an educational tool?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How is feedback given to students about how they are getting on in their studies?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Are assessment results used for any purposes other than feedback to the students, how, why?</td>
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<td>- Has this changed over time?</td>
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<td>Students</td>
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<td>Impression and experience of Programme/module plans (plans, LO descriptions)</td>
<td>Awareness of LOs&lt;br&gt;- Are you aware of the programme description for your study programme? What descriptions of specific modules/courses? What are these like?&lt;br&gt;- Do you know of any changes in the way your course is planned and organised (in the curriculum)? What kinds?&lt;br&gt;- Have you seen and descriptions of aims or outcomes of your programme or specific modules? What were they? Where did you see these?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching plans/approach and LOs</td>
<td>Goals and approach to learning&lt;br&gt;- What is the goal of your current study programme? (aim for degree level goals first, then ask about module level)&lt;br&gt;- How do you know what you should learn or be able to do when you complete the course, subjects, courses etc? Where do you look for information? How are the aims/outcomes of your courses described?&lt;br&gt;- Do descriptions of modules/courses influence how you choose courses? In what ways?&lt;br&gt;  - Do you see LOs as a minimum you need to pass a course or goals to stretch for?&lt;br&gt;- Do they influence how you work on the subject? In what ways?&lt;br&gt;- Are the study programme descriptions or module descriptions used in teaching / during courses? Please provide examples of how? E.g. used at start/end/pre-exams?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation/Assessment and LOs</td>
<td>links between learning and assessment?&lt;br&gt;- Do you know how you will be assessed on this study programme (give example)?&lt;br&gt;- Do you know what you will be assessed in relation to? What will you be expected to do?&lt;br&gt;- Are you clear about the objectives of the programme (give example)?&lt;br&gt;- Do you think they ways you are assessed will show if you have met the aims of the course/module?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results information and use of results data (performance information, the link between steering / management and teaching / learning / assessment)</td>
<td>Use of performance information as an external guide for learning?&lt;br&gt;- So far, how does your experience of the program fit with the course description?&lt;br&gt;- Do you feel you will get what you expect out of the programme? In what ways?</td>
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</table>

**Key terms to translate and handle with care in analysis and comparison**

- læringsmål : learning objective/ aim
- læringsutbytte : learning outcome
- faglig : academic or occupational, depending on context can refer to professional, specialism, subject content
- resultatkrav : performance requirements
- resultatoppfølging : performance monitoring/ tracking
- resultatstyring : performance management/ management by results
- Emnebeskrivelsene : description of course/module – document summarizing objectives, outcomes, course structure etc.
Appendix III:

Confirmation regarding co-authorship and contribution to each publication ('medforfattererklæring').
Required enclosure when requesting that a dissertation be considered for a doctor's degree

Declaration

describing the independent research contribution of the candidate

- In addition to the dissertation, there should be enclosed a declaration describing the independent research contribution of the candidate for each paper constituting the dissertation.
- The declaration should be filled in and signed by candidate and co-authors. Use the back of the page if necessary.
- The declaration will show the contribution to conception and design, or development and analysis of a theoretical model, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data, contribution to drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content etc.

Article no. 1


The independent contribution of the candidate:
This can be seen as a two-stage paper, with two types of data and analysis. The first part is an analysis of ‘PURE’ project data and discussion of contrasting political/administrative features — this part was led by Svein & Ivar - they developed a comparative analysis and set of lenses from the data. The comparative analysis of HELO interview data, and relating this to the framework and comparative lenses developed in the first part, was where I had a significant role. The four authors’ developed the conclusions and overall argument together.

Process/empirical material: I was involved in conducting/attending interviews (some in Norway and all in England). In terms of ‘closeness to texts’ I was probably the author most familiar with both sets of national interview transcripts, and spent most time developing the comparative analysis from HELO interviews.

Analysis: I led on an empirical analysis of the interview material but in a way that was guided by the analytical perspectives/lenses developed and described in detail by the other authors.

Overall, the authors all contributed a similar amount to this paper: all four drafted significant sections of the text and worked together to revise it. My contribution here was specifically in large sections in the analysis and discussion and I played a role editing and re-working the entire text, both in preparation for submission and in response to reviewers’ comments.

Signature of candidate

Signatures of co-authors
Article no. 2


The independent contribution of the candidate:
My contribution is terms of the articles empirical findings and the implications drawn was significant – I would say this article reflected 50/50 input from both authors. I led on conducting the document analysis - identifying relevant documentation for the national cases (with the final selection discussed with my co-author). I led on the analysis of those documents, guided by the theoretical framework that was developed by Bjørn. I was responsible for drafting around half of the original text, and my co-author and I worked together editing/re-ordering and finalizing the text.

__________________________  ____________________________
Signature of candidate      Signature of co-authors

Article no. 3


THIS WAS SINGLE AUTHOR WORK – NO CO-AUTHORS

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Signature of candidate

Article no. 4


THIS WAS A SINGLE AUTHOR WORK – NO CO-AUTHORS

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Signature of candidate