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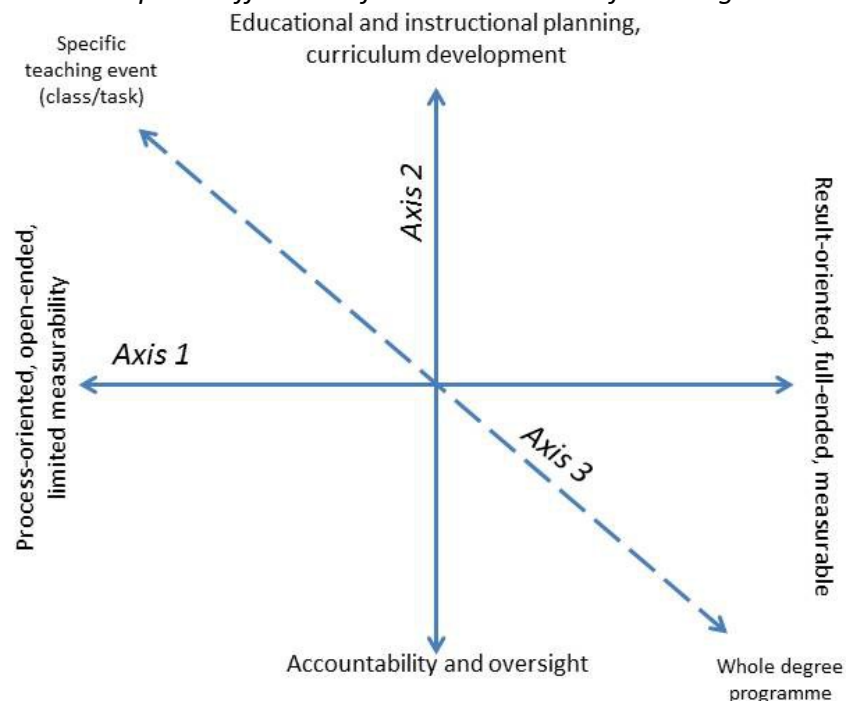
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Defining Learning Outcomes

Attempts to define LOs as an object of enquiry are often been frustrated by a lack of theoretical clarity (Allan, 1996; Adam, 2004; Prøitz, 2010). Finding stable measures for common higher education LOs, such as critical thinking has also raised concerns (Karlsen, 2011). LOs typically come into play in efforts to specify and operationalize what students should have learnt, by what stage (Ewell, 2002). However, such specification leads LOs into several areas of controversy and contested definitions about their meaning and impact.

The paper approaches this contested area constructively, building on analyses of the actual and potential applications of LOs developed by Prøitz (2010) and Hussey & Smith (2008). These provide three 'axes' of variation in potential learning outcome interpretations and applications (see figure 1). Prøitz's (2010) review of the theoretical discussions around LOs highlights the range of views about the nature of LOs and their characteristics, on a continuum from process-oriented and open-ended, to result-oriented, full-ended and assessable outcomes. She offers a second continuum based on their use as tools primarily for planning and developing courses and educational practices on the one hand, to tools focused on accountability and oversight on the other.

Figure 1: Three axes to explore different definitions and uses of learning outcomes in HE



The third axis is based on Hussey & Smith's (2008) discussion of the use of LOs at the level of individual teaching events, whole courses / modules, or whole degree programmes. They argue that using the same term to describe uses at all three levels is misleading, as the specific and definable results of teaching-learning events and interactions are necessarily of different to the broader intended outcomes of whole programmes.

Axis 2 highlights how, as well as focusing on the internal congruence of curricula, LOs can also support a focus on external congruence. In the UK, this has involved the use of subject benchmarks produced by members of particular disciplines. Across Europe similar work has been done through the European Qualifications Framework. Individual degree programmes are expected to show how the learning outcomes of their curricula are congruent with these benchmarks. However, there has been an increasing focus on a different form of external congruence that places much greater emphasis on measureability and comparability. The OECD AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) project marked a significant attempt to develop measures of LOs that are directly comparable. Thus rather than academics and institutions developing a sense of how their curricula align with external benchmarks, the focus is on whether students develop the same knowledge and skills through studying for very varied degrees. The intention is to provide measures of the relative quality and impact of higher education provided by different institutions and disciplines globally (OECD, 2013; Braun 2013).

In this paper we argue that where LOs are developed to support this very broad idea of comparability, this may lead to a focus on identifying outcomes that are most measurable across contexts rather than those outcomes that reflect the purposes of higher education, or the impact of higher education on students abilities and experience. Such externally and comparability focused outcomes may tend to crowd out or undermine internally and teaching focused approaches in practice. This has important implications for the way international learning outcome efforts may influence more established national attempts to align curricula and make the teaching and learning process clearer for students.

We argue that what is special about *higher* education is the personal relationship that students develop with disciplinary and professional knowledge. It is these relationships, which are often idiosyncratic and emergent, which lead to the transformative aspects of higher education so highly valued by students, governments and societies (Ashwin 2014). Where standardisation obscures the ways in which students' identities are transformed by their engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge, then the danger is that we are throwing out the baby to keep the bathwater clean.

In this paper we will explore these challenges, as well as alternative ways of approaching learning outcomes that allow some form of comparison without sacrificing a focus on the higher elements of higher education.

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