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Proposal

Title: Quality Hazards in the Learning Outcome Model

Abstract (149 words):

Core academic principles and purposes of higher education can be expressed in such terms as students' personal development or academic identity. These are important in the

Bologna process, for example in relation to life-long learning. At the same time, policies about learning outcomes regulate much of the teachers' everyday practice. The paper analyse the extent to which this combination of perspectives can be a quality hazard, and it is argued that two particular areas can be problematic. The first is that desirable effects of higher education that cannot be expressed as learning outcomes are at risk of being neglected. The second is that learning outcomes can become a roof, restricting students' ambitions and their entire outlook on what higher education is supposed to be. How these risks can be taken into account when formulating quality criteria is discussed in relation to the responsibilities of students, teachers and institutional management.

The paper is based on: *Research*

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. *No, it has not*

Text of paper (2975 words):

We can find a multitude of ideas about the purposes of higher education, varying between stakeholders, with ensuing quality criteria. However, those involved in higher education must be aware that discussions of quality in higher education are at risk of being oversimplified, in particular if external stakeholders apply short-term perspectives (e.g. Faust, 2010). Thus, there is the need for the higher education sector to take a long-term responsibility for educational quality, for example by discussing quality in terms of academic values. Here, quality criteria based on academic values rooted in centuries of academic discussion can be argued to have a central position in the higher education discourse. With a legacy of principles and purposes going back to educational visionaries such as Wilhelm von Humboldt or Cardinal Newman, we want our students to grow as humans, making them prepared to take responsibility and develop as active citizens contributing to society. In this paper, we regard these ambitions as *core principles and purposes* of higher education. However, what Trow (2007) called the massification of higher education has radically changed the conditions for higher education since these principles and purposes first were formulated. These changes have called for international standards and formal frameworks, defined by overall policy initiative such as the Bologna process (e.g. Bologna process, 2007, 2009; Curaj, Scott, Vlasceanu, & Wilson, 2012). In quality assurance, this is not the least expressed through the ESG (Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area, 2015). A specific example is the *learning-outcome model*, ubiquitous in curriculum design in the Bologna framework. There is little question that these policies has improved essential aspects of academic quality and added professionalism in higher education, but we need to identify and handle possible conflicts between the core principles and purposes, and policy-regulated hands-on practice such as the construction of learning outcomes. With the need to uphold core academic principles and purposes as our point of departure, the purpose of this paper is to suggest and discuss possible quality hazards of the learning outcome model, including consequences for quality assurance.

Core principles and purposes of higher education

In his vision for the Berlin University, written in 1809 or 1810, Wilhelm von Humboldt saw the development of the students as free thinking individuals as fundamental (Humboldt, 1970, Wertz, 1996). For Humboldt, the purpose of higher education was to make students grasp the uncertainty of knowledge and to understand the areas where we lack knowledge. Thus, higher education should be qualitatively different from school education, and not a continuation of teaching students "how it is". As an effect, higher education was to support a life-long development of the students' potential. In similar vein, Cardinal Newman saw higher education not just as a matter of gaining factual knowledge but to give students an ability to

reflect on their knowledge, thus transforming the students into good citizens. In his influential book *The idea of a university*, Newman (1852) argued that higher education should be a "cultivation of mind". Many scholars have returned to these issues over the last two hundred years and in addition, the importance of higher education for democracy, civilization and liberation has been highlighted by for example Nussbaum (1997), Barnett (2009) and Strauss (2004). However, for example Pechar (2012) argued that the Humboltian tradition was an elitist conception suitable only for a few privileged and talented students. As argued by for example Filippakou (2011) and Friberg (2015), any discussion of quality in higher education is based on ideological assumptions, but the core principles and purposes are still vital for our definitions of the goals of higher education: In European policies for higher education we see that its purpose is not only to meet the needs of an advanced work-force but the need for students' personal development as participants in democratic systems (e.g. Bologna process, 2007, 2009; Zaga, 2012). In the Bologna context, the core principles and purposes are also present in the often-repeated necessity to prepare the students for life-long learning, giving them both the skills and the mind-set to search for advanced knowledge long after they have left university. The quest for research-based education, as described by for example Jenkins, Healey and Zetter (2007) also mirrors these ideals. Thus, also in the era of Bologna, the purpose of higher education is a matter of supporting the students' personal development, giving them a mind-set and motivation for a quest for knowledge and competence and for responsibility. This makes the development of an academic student identity a central point, as discussed by for example Barnett (1990) and Briggs, Clark, & Hall (2012). Here, we argue that the fundamental academic habit of continuous development also must be highlighted when we look at the core principles and purposes; what is already good can always be better. The students have the right to expect that we approach their education with this principle in mind, both when we develop our practice and when we set their tasks and give them feedback.

Learning outcomes

The introduction of learning outcomes, central in the Bologna process, meant an important shift of focus from the teachers to the students, expressed as the ambition that curriculum planning should take its departure from what we want the students to achieve and not from teachers' views of what a curriculum ought to cover (e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2011; Froment, Kohler, Purser & Wilson, 2006). Therefore, we should formulate learning outcomes that the students should reach, and plan our courses around this, instead of planning the courses around teachers intended output. These learning outcomes cover specific disciplinary knowledge and skills as well as generic outcomes. The latter are the kinds of competence assumed to follow from higher education regardless of discipline (even if this is a disputed conception, see for example Jones, 2013; Moore, 2011). Further, the learning outcomes should provide the criteria for the assessment of students' achievements, as expressed in the model of *constructive alignment* (e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2011; Gosling & Moon, 2002). Beyond the benefits of providing a tool for curriculum construction, the model is also assumed to show stakeholders such as employers what competence to expect from a student. The extent to which learning outcomes are reached is of course also an important quality criterion, making the learning outcome model a viable tool for quality assurance.

Conflicts between learning outcomes and the core principals and purposes

There are two particular areas where we argue that the principles and practices of learning outcomes are at risk of being in conflict with the core principles and purposes discussed above. The first concerns the extent to which all our hoped effects of higher education can be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The second concerns how learning outcomes in

effect can become “roofs”, restricting how far the students are expected to strive. A common theme in both these areas is that the model of learning outcome might delimit the attention and the ambitions of both teachers and students.

Goals that cannot be expressed as learning outcomes

The first risk is two-fold, since it concerns the aspects of the core principles and purposes that are in conflict with the learning outcome model because they (1) cannot be expressed as learning outcome and/or (2), cannot be assessed. A clear example is the need for life-long learning, with the ensuing competences that we expect that our students should achieve. We can express skills and knowledge that should support life-long learning in terms of learning outcomes, such as proficiency in the use of academic search engines and the competence to read primary research papers. However, we are not expected to write in course plans or other formal documents that the students should develop an identity supporting critical curiosity, and it might even be formally wrong to do so. Even if we should try to express learning outcomes in terms of the identity and the curiosity that the notion of life-long learning implies, we cannot assess them: Not only because we do not know if this purpose is fulfilled until many years after the students had graduated, but because academic identities and mind-sets are not phenomena to be evaluated in examinations. Still, the core principles and standards of higher education imply that the students should develop them at university.

We argue that there is a risk that a focus on learning outcomes can delimit or divert the teachers’ and the managements’ attention. As for example Reindal (2013) argued in her criticism of modern higher education, it is through thinking in terms of learning outcomes that we come to define what an ‘education person’ is. This will in particular be so if institutional management stresses a naïve take on higher education and restrict the teachers’ roles and recourses in accordance. Here, an example is the benefits of making students leave their ‘comfort zones’ as part of a higher education. If we believe that students can benefit from confronting new ideas that challenge their current beliefs, we can of course include what might be such “new ideas” in the learning outcomes and hope they will lead to the desired effect, but the process as such cannot be a learning outcome, or a basis for assessment. With a narrow focus on learning outcomes teachers are at risk of focusing only on assessable skills when formulating their learning outcomes – leaving out learning outcomes that have secondary effects such as challenging students’ beliefs. Further, if we from day one tell our students that higher education is about reaching learning outcomes, we will also influence how the students think about their responsibilities and their roles as students: Their task will be to reach the learning outcomes and nothing else. This is hardly a good precondition for fostering a culture of curiosity preparing for life-long learning. As noted by Reindal (2013), the current assumptions about learning outcomes also seems to be that knowledge or skills has a power in themselves to transfer students, but this is not necessarily so. This might be particularly problematic if we mix in a student culture calling for ‘trigger warnings’ and the right not having to confront potentially disturbing course content (e.g. Morris, 2015).

Learning outcomes as a roof for student ambitions

A principle stressed in the literature is that learning outcomes must not be ambiguous, as the students should be able to know what is expected from them in order to pass an exam. Biggs and Tang (2011) described that learning outcomes should be “designed and written with a view to the kind of knowledge, the content and the level of understanding intended (p. 130).” The learning outcomes must therefore be as complete as possible and assessment criteria should define the performance to be demonstrated by the student at the end of a course or

activity. This transparency of the learning outcomes is further stressed by Gosling and Moon (2002, p. 11): "Students have a right to know what they should be learning and the basis on which their work will be judged." But if our students should know exactly what to expect from them, we also give the message that there is no need to strive any higher than this. In effect, we create a roof for the students' ambitions, and make this roofing an integral part of the higher education system. While it is easy to state that we must be careful not seeing learning outcomes as a roof but as a minimum requirement, this is more easily said than done. If we are expected to make the goals transparent, letting the students know exactly what is expected from them, learning outcome *are* creating roofs. The question is instead how we can stop those roofs from restricting the students' ambitions. If we want to uphold the call for transparency of learning outcomes, the remedy against the roof-hazard is not to regard learning outcomes as a minimum level, but to write learning outcomes that give students opportunities and ambitions to excel – either by broadening their knowledge in the field beside what basic learning outcomes call for, or by acquiring much deeper understanding of a topic than defined by simplified learning outcomes. If we fail in this, we might be at risk of losing one of the important aspects of the academic core principles: the ideal that also the already good can be supported to be even better. Here, we must not the least be on guard against tendencies to see students as victims of a threatening academic culture, and instead see higher education as a meeting between responsible adults (see for example Friberg, 2015 for a further discussion of this).

Also in relation to the roof-problem, there is a risk that the idea of learning outcomes, as well as the learning outcomes themselves, delimits the teacher's conceptions of their tasks and responsibilities: If the learning outcome model is taken for granted by the teachers, they might not even see the extent to which they delimit their students by creating roofs. Further, pre-defined criteria for assessment can make the students into cue-seekers, when we instead wish for incentives for students to employ strategies for 'deep learning', and at the best perhaps even be able to surprise us in their responses to our assessment tasks. However, if the students have the capacity to surprise us, there is presently little support from the system for us to encourage or even reward them. While for example Biggs and Tang (2011) argued that assessment tasks *could* be open-ended, they considered this a special case, for particular circumstances such as design education.

Conclusions and implications

It is our firm belief that the Bologna process and the implementation of learning outcomes has been fruitful in fostering professionalism, structure and quality in European higher education, but we must not lose sight of the core principles and purposes of higher education nor underestimate the risks if we do not see the possible conflicts in the model of learning outcomes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present suggestions about how these problems can be overcome in practice, but we still want to point in the directions of a few solutions that might be viable. Here, the common theme is *responsibility*: The responsibility of teachers to support the students' development and students responsibility for their own learning and for their knowledge (which is not the same thing).

To address the problem that some desirable effect of higher education cannot be expressed as learning outcomes, there is a need to give teachers incentives to understand and promote student transition and to understand what life-long learning or critical thinking actually implies in the disciplinary and professional contexts of the educations they are involved with. Further, there is a need for a discussion on how to formulate learning outcomes in order to provide secondary effects such as an academic identity.



The 'roof problem' is, as argued above, not to be handled by just treating learning outcomes as minimum requirements. Instead, we must construct learning outcomes not restricting ambitious students and show all our students that only they themselves should set the limit. One way is to adopt different sets of learning outcomes reflecting different grades and the levels of achievement needed to attain them. We can also imagine learning outcomes about students making their own decisions on how far to strive, perhaps even in combination with a contract with the teacher to support such ambitions. If our task is to create life-long learners, it is the teachers' task to influence the students' motivation to study, to be academic role models and as teachers also role models in how to convey knowledge to others (another generic skill).

If such a development is desirable, quality policies, on institutional, national or international level, should include also the aspects supporting the core principles and purposes, going beyond what is expressed as traditional learning outcomes. This can include explicit in-deep quality criteria concerning the extent to which students take responsibility for their learning and their knowledge. This leads to a further quality criteria for higher education with a potential to really influence practice: The extent to which an institution promotes learning outcomes that give students ways to excel in their studies, and the extent to which students with the ambitions and abilities to reach these goals are supported in their quest (while students with lesser abilities or ambitions are supported to achieve more modest outcomes). This also implies further ways of defining quality, such as the extent to which the teachers help the students to develop the highest ambitions for their studies, and to develop an academic identity. While such ambitions or identities hardly can be seen as learning outcomes, it is difficult to deny its importance (in particular in a context of widening participation).

We cannot but express our surprise that teachers of higher education across Europe appears to accept the current situation. Perhaps it is out of convenience, and perhaps an answer lies in the lower status of teaching, as compared to research, as pointed out by for example Boyer (1992): We suggest that this can make teachers less inclined to make their work more complicated by problematizing models imposed on them from various policies. Still, this makes the roles for quality assurance even more compelling.

By coming back to the core principles and purposes, we might create expectations and rewards of curiosity, hopefully even bringing some feelings of 'magic' into higher education, both for students and teachers. This might even be at least a part of a remedy against the lower status of teaching, making it more rewarding and academically stimulating, in particular if paired with incentives from institutional management. If so, also institutional management must see their responsibility for upholding the core principles and purposes. If this is a desirable development, supporting it is the responsibility for those involved in quality assurance, both on institutional, national and international level.

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Discussion questions:

1. Do you agree that the risks presented here can be a threat to quality?
2. Are there particular areas where the risks discussed here are more or less threatening?
3. How might students, teachers and management react to these suggested risks and the suggested solutions, at your institutions?
4. Have you any experience of handling these risks at your institutions?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.