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Learning outcomes in higher education: assumptions, positions and the views of early-career staff in the UK system

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According to the UK Quality Assurance Agency, the adoption and use of learning outcomes has been complete across UK higher education since 2007, when it declared that 'most departments and institutions have fully adopted the principles of learning outcomes'. And yet, the evidence from the ground to support this statement is currently lacking. The issue of learning outcomes has been a topic of debate, which runs far deeper than the most recent criticisms. So far there have only been sporadic and limited attempts at researching exactly how learning outcomes are used by both teaching staff and students. Whether they indeed support student learning through the constructive alignment model put forward by Biggs, or whether they are simply another bureaucratic hoop to jump through which has no impact on the learning process. This paper aims to add to the increasing evidence base by presenting the findings of research carried out amongst early career, probationary staff at a research-led institution in the UK, and hopes to contribute to wider debates which will eventually influence policy.

Keywords: learning outcomes in higher education; outcomes-based education; perceptions of learning outcomes; measurability of learning

Introduction

Outcomes-based education evolved from an attempt to rationalise education in the early twentieth century, and resurfaced in various guises from the 1960s onwards. In terms of higher education (HE), it has been at the core of an intense drive for accountability and quality assurance, spearheaded by nation-wide quality assurance organisations such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK or the Australian Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Whilst there are many enthusiastic supporters and fervent critics of learning outcomes (Adam 2004), the evidence from the ground to support any one side of the argument is only beginning to emerge.

It is currently unclear what impact the adoption of an outcomes-based model has actually had on the learning process. Studies which investigate the perceptions, attitudes, understanding and practice of teaching staff and students with regard to learning outcomes and constructive alignment are only just beginning to emerge.[1] This paper investigates the attitudes and practice of early-career staff at a research-led UK university, in an attempt to offer more evidence for this debate.

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Whilst it is important to launch straight into the immediate subject at hand, it is equally important to frame it within a number of contexts: educational, political and educational. All these contexts have had a huge impact on the development and adoption of the model we have today. Before the presentation and analysis of the research data, this paper will offer an overview of the historical background of outcomes-based education through three lenses: the educational/philosophical roots, the economic/political underpinnings and the evolution of the current model of constructive alignment.

Proponents and opponents in the battle for outcomes

The genesis of learning outcomes

In the British and European context, the 'trouble' with learning outcomes and the arguments against their use are fairly recent, and often crystallised in the work of Hussey and Smith (2003, 2009) versus the QAA and the Bologna agreement-driven implementation of learning outcomes in HE institutions across the European Union. However, the debate is not new. The deeper, philosophical debate, support and critique of outcomes-based education have been going on for a century at the very least.

The subject originated in the scientific movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, spearheaded by scholars such as Thorndike and especially Bobbit (Eisner 1967). Bobbit, the 'father of curriculum theory' (Eisner 1967, 551), understood learning as the transmission to children of particular skills and experiences which would/should be identified and categorised by curriculum designers. He identified nine areas under which particular objectives (160 of them) were listed. Other scholars added to this extensive list and refined it further. This movement collapsed by the 1930s and was followed by the progressivist movement which took a different view of the child 'not as a complex machine but as a growing organism who ought to participate in planning his own educational program' (Eisner 1967, 551–552).

Progressivism was soon replaced by a resurgence of the curriculum movement and the emergence of Ralph Tyler's work on curriculum design (Tyler 1949), but also Benjamin Bloom's work on the cognitive and affective domains (Bloom et al. 1956; Bloom, Krathwohl, and Masia 1964). Bloom's taxonomy, as it came to be known and widely used by educationalists worldwide, provided a clear hierarchy of increasingly complex cognitive functions, from 'knowledge' at the bottom (demonstrated through recall/repetition of information) to synthesis and evaluation at the top of the cognitive hierarchy. This model is often depicted as a pyramid or a table, and is extremely popular in curriculum design processes. Gagné (1974), characterised as a behaviourist by Prøitz (2010) and Burke (1995), has also contributed to this debate by seeing learning outcomes as precisely predictable and perfectly measurable.

This model, and subsequent revisions of it (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001; Krathwohl 2002), were of course contested and associated with a behaviourist approach to learning which was deemed inappropriate and seen as 'the narrow strait-jacket […] imposed upon curriculum designers' (Allan 1996, 97). Scholars such as Elliot Eisner and Cohen & Manion reacted to the idea of behaviourist objectives as reductive, and proposed less specific objectives which allowed for personalised learning (Allan 1996). Eisner's work highlighted that learning is heavily dependent on context: the student, the teacher, the subject, and as such it was impossible to 'sort all learning into pre-specified terms' (Prøitz 2010, 122). Eisner (1967) questioned the predictability of learning outcomes focusing on their limitations: 'the dynamic and complex process

of instruction yields outcomes far too numerous to be specified in behavioral and content terms in advance' (554). In other words, attempts to specify the exact outcome are in fact futile, and by consequence can only serve as *minimum* indications of what *might* happen in the classroom.

Eisner's criticisms were further elaborated and developed by Stenhouse (1975), who objected to the universal application of outcomes as a process which serves to trivialise and dehumanise the learning process, making it less democratic, but also ultimately unusable for the actual teacher. This echoes Freire's (1970) work which rejects top-down, predetermined education versus 'problem-posing' education which allows questioning, exploration and discovery – and which can naturally not be predicted or measured easily. Farquharson (2013) draws attention to the dangers of the universal application of learning outcomes, suggesting that the uniformity and universality of the learning outcomes model leads to *isomorphism*: institutions appearing and behaving in the same way, something which Australian HE has inherited from its European and North American counterparts. The term isomorphism is an interesting one, and was also used by Eisner (1979) to describe/decry behaviourist objectives and characteristics as 'isomorphic', leading to processes which mirrored training for either the industry or the military. Barnett (1988) also weighed into the debate, attempting to reclaim the aims of HE as emancipatory and not possible to be expressed in the shape of outcomes. Eisner returned to the debate in 2000, when he warned against the creation of standards for 'just about everything that moves'. The idea of meeting the outcomes one sets for themselves and their students goes against the aspirational nature of education, where educators always 'seek more than they can accomplish' (Eisner 2000, 343–344).

Learning outcomes as a quality control process in a business/industrial context: Thatcherism, neoliberalism and other animals

Avis (2000) and Shattock (2008) link the emergence of the learning outcomes model in the UK with Thatcherism and the shift from autonomous academia to centrally-managed academia, something which Shattock describes as part of the wider movement of New Public Management (NPM) in the UK. Shattock's thesis is that HE was – for all intents and purposes – absorbed 'into the public policy making machinery of the state' (182), and as such had to be 'managed' based on the same principles as health and primary and secondary education (Coats 2000). For HE, the focus shifted to 'external accountability and scrutiny through regulatory and auditory bodies' (Dobbins et al. 2014, 3). Avis (2000) took the argument further, linking learning outcomes with a managerialism which attempts to equate the needs of society and the needs of the student with those of the economy (43).

Hussey and Smith (2002) condemned learning outcomes as mere tools that serve managerialism, and proposed a model where learning outcomes were context and student-dependent. They also criticised the 'uniformity' with which the idea of learning outcomes was implemented, which went against disciplinary differences and peculiarities. They stated that learning outcomes were 'misappropriated for managerial purposes' which has in turn led to 'their distortion to the point that they are […] ill-conceived and incapable of doing what is claimed for them' (222).

Other scholars took a more philosophical approach. Others moved beyond the classroom and into socio-economic planes. Brancaleone and O'Brien (2011) linked learning outcomes with managerialist ideology, valued precisely because they are 'product-

assessable' (504). As such, learning outcomes become a 'predictive promise' by the 'producer-teacher' to the 'customer-learner' (504). Learning outcomes, according to this idea, are not at all an innocent tool for clarifying expectations, ensuring quality and making achievements assessable. They are firmly seated within an understanding of education as an economic transaction, often serving as part of the 'packaging' for the consumer (510). Echoing Baudrillard, they are also characterised as a *simulacrum*, a signifier which operates within the sphere of the symbolic/totemic, within a social order where consumption is key (510).

Finally, the idea of learning outcomes and measurability and quality control can be viewed within the context of what Ritzer (1993) termed 'McDonaldization' of society in a number of different facets. Ritzer's thesis on the characteristics of McDonaldization links the attempt to control process and product to Max Weber's work on formal rationality and bureaucracy. Ritzer's claims that under the McDonald's model 'people are led to predetermined ends through pre-specified means' (23–24), something which would ring true with both Eisner and Brancaleone and O'Brien. Under his discussion of 'calculability', one of the characteristics of McDonaldization, Ritzer warns against an HE environment where quantity becomes more important than quality, where the focus is on ranking systems. This starts from the ranking of student grades and grade point averages, but is prominent in every single facet of academic life: institutions are ranked nationally, internationally.

Ritzer's arguments about education were refined further by Hartley (1995) and Parker and Jary (1995), to focus on the increasing focus on management in UKHE. Parker and Jary in their 'McUniversity' argue that we are facing a situation where, based on Weber's and Ritzer's thinking, professional structures (the academic) have been weakened in favour of a centralised bureaucracy, which has in turn intensified labour. They argue that the term 'quality' is one which is externally imposed in a process of 'labelling' which in turn stresses comparability (324).

Looking at academia in 2015, it is hard to argue against these positions. The focus is heavily on measurement and ranking, for teaching and research alike. In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework exercise is a focal point of utmost importance for most institutions-something which some would argue heavily distorts and confuses the purpose of HE. We have research impact and journal impact factors, citation indexes and other tools for measuring and ranking research quality. We also now have other yardsticks for measurement of teaching quality: the National Student Survey; the statistics available to all interested parties, such as those offered by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA); information on teaching qualifications; staff–student ratios; contact hours; automated evaluation questionnaires linked to performance management; and, finally an increasing focus *not on what students are learning (or how) but on what makes students happy* in 'customer satisfaction' mode (which adds weight to Brancaleone's views on education as social commodity and the producer/consumer relationship). All these are fed into a national and global system which churns out rankings, which in turn are heavily used in marketing literature. Learning outcomes are part of something bigger. At an age when everything is measured, learning cannot be an exception.

Learning outcomes and learning: student-centred curriculum tools or strait-jackets?

Crucially for British and European HE, Benjamin Bloom's ideas formed the basis for Biggs and Collis (1982) Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO).

The SOLO taxonomy is squarely based on Bloom's behaviourist taxonomy which sees learning as a series of demonstrated (and demonstrable) behaviour patterns. The SOLO taxonomy proposes the use of particular verbs which operate on the different levels of Bloom's taxonomy as a way of creating levels of learning outcomes appropriate to the context. However, the constructive alignment model proposed by Biggs is purported to be constructivist in nature, thus negating the use of a behaviourist model as its underlying principle. As such, Biggs sought to bridge two learning super-theories which are, in my view, unbridgeable.

Biggs reworked his model in the seminal *Teaching for Quality Learning in Higher Education* in 1999.[2] This saw the introduction of a 'binary' – and some would say reductive – choice between the 'academically-minded' Susan and the more 'superficial' and 'strategic' Robert: a rather simplistic way of understanding the complexity of teaching practice, the exciting unpredictability championed by the likes of Eisner. At the heart of Biggs' argument is the assumption that the 'Roberts' and 'Susans' of this world fall into stable and unchanging behaviour patterns. That Robert might turn into Susan in a different context, with different content, teacher or design, is not something that can only be achieved by looking at the learning outcomes. Robert's motivations and emotions, his views on the relevance of topics to him, his like or dislike of the subject and, finally, his own background and personal aims, may change from classroom to classroom. This also applies to Susan.

Biggs' work, although essentially well intended, has served to oversimplify and use labels to determine what learning actually means, how it can be measured and monitored by the teacher and – by consequence – regulatory bodies. There is a huge contradiction here, which was also noted by Hussey and Smith, between the language of student-centredness, learner independence and enquiry-based learning, and the over-specification of learning outcomes, especially at a module level. Enabling students to construct their own learning requires risk-taking: veering off the pre-specified path, thus putting the teacher in a 'tight corner' (Hussey and Smith 2003, 358). Tight, inflexible and predictive learning outcomes do not serve the student. They serve the need to put everything regarding education in tidy little boxes with labels; they serve a spreadsheet bureaucracy which seems to operate with a Stalin-esque five-year plan mentality, based not on reality, but on the need to have a semblance of order.

Furedi (2012) entirely dismissed the use of learning outcomes, as something which stifles the students' creativity and potential, encouraging them to aim for minimum thresholds. Melton (1996) also raised his concerns over the implementation of learning outcomes, seeing them as a kind of limitation of the teacher's autonomy, and 'not the best way of supporting independence, creativity and enthusiasm' (417). Rees (2004) focused on what the incompatibility of outcomes-based curricula with problem-based learning, a method widely used in medical education and beyond.

On the other hand, there are the more moderate voices. Gosling (2009) argued that learning outcomes serve to move away from *just* content to specify the skills we expect our students to demonstrate, making the process 'less mystical and more transparent' (2). Gosling acknowledges that although learning outcomes have behaviourist origins (and argues against Biggs' model), insisting that they do not have to be expressed in such terms. Therefore, learning outcomes should not be used as measurable predictors of what the students will (or should) achieve, but rather 'as a means of […] focusing the learning activities that students will engage in and focusing the assessment of that learning' (2–3). We see here a more pragmatic approach. Gosling does not propose scrapping the system entirely, but attempts to make use of it for

the benefit of the students vis-à-vis a learning environment where aims and direction are vague and often content heavy. Gosling disagrees with bureaucratisation, pointing out that QA processes attempt to create universally accepted standards, but in instances (and disciplines) where this is not appropriate, this becomes at best a box-ticking exercise (3–4).

The danger here is that the whole system of learning outcomes, with constructive alignment at its core, *cannot* be realistically implemented across disciplines. In many cases, the axis from outcomes to assessment via learning activities is incomplete, ending where the teacher has some ideas about what to do and what to focus on, and not reaching the student in a meaningful and constructive way. This is a picture which is only beginning to emerge from evidence both in the UK (Dobbins et al. 2014; Skinner 2014) and elsewhere, such as Australia – where the model and TEQSA are more recent phenomena than in Europe and the UK (Brawley 2012).

Practice in the UK today

The catalyst for the universal implementation of learning outcomes in UKHE was the Dearing Report in 1997, which placed emphasis on quality and accountability, and in turn led to the creation of the QAA whose role included the safeguarding of standards and benchmarks (Dobbins et al. 2014). This is the context within which Biggs' (1999a,1999b, 2003) work appeared, which further refined the argument for learning outcomes-based education, and had a huge impact on HE policy.

The Bologna Agreement of 1999 led to the creation of EU-wide standards and benchmarks, and became the catalyst for the enhancement of quality assurance processes and agencies across the continent – such as the QAA in the UK which was founded in 1997. In this particular case, the foundation of the QAA was prompted not only by the increasing need for 'accountability', but also the HE reform which came with the publication of the Dearing Report which also introduced tuition fees for the first time in the UK system – and therefore made the need for 'quality control' more pressing. The introduction of fees also brought with it the need to ensure accessibility to HE for those in underprivileged social and economic settings. In 2004, the Higher Education Act introduced the idea of 'top-up fees', which was accompanied by the formation of the Office for Fair Access to 'for people from lower income and other under-represented backgrounds' (OFFA 2015).

The mantle for the establishment of a quality assurance mechanism, and in particular the implementation of the constructive alignment paradigm as proposed by Biggs was taken in turn by the UK Higher Education Academy and the QAA. What followed the introduction of nation-wide benchmarks, externally managed audits to ensure the implementation of the model across UKHE. The QAA assumed the mantle of 'Champion for Constructive Alignment!' (Jackson 2002) and published numerous guides for the implementation of learning outcomes (Jackson 2003). By 2007, the QAA would be triumphantly declaring that learning outcomes had become embedded across UK HE, and that 'most departments and institutions have fully adopted the principles of learning outcomes', and that despite some difficulties in some cases, and 'differential rates of progress […] the adoption of learning outcomes has been addressed with vigour' (QAA 2007, 1, 13). Across institutions, specialist administrative quality assurance mechanisms were established in order to ensure that learning outcomes were used and included in centrally approved course documentation (such as module and programme descriptors).

On a practical level, how does the idea of learning outcomes become embedded, implemented and adopted? Did the QAA's 2007 proclamation mean that constructive alignment was a reality at most HE institutions in the UK? Evidence from research shows that this is far from clear (Dobbins et al. 2014; Sin 2014; Skinner 2014). Although none of the research has looked at the practicalities of the implementation of learning outcomes at programme and module level, it is extremely unlikely that QA teams and committees have deep knowledge of Biggs' SOLO taxonomy, constructivism, behaviourism, constructive alignment or – indeed – the relationship between the QAA's benchmark statements and those.

Working within the context of academic development one can encounter the impact (or lack thereof) on the HE teachers whose job it is to design modules and programmes based on the constructive alignment model. At first sight, through conversations with these teachers, one notices that there is often a distinct lack of awareness, not of learning outcomes *per se*, but of the principles they are based upon and their key functions and characteristics. Through such discussions, especially with early-career academics, I have come to suspect that learning outcomes have become another bureaucratic procedure which has little impact on the learning process or programme and module design. This was definitely the view I was explicitly given by a more experienced member of academic staff who declared that 'learning outcomes are a fudge, a box-ticking exercise' which has no resemblance to reality on the ground. I could not help but wonder whether Hussey and Smith's (2002) assertion that they are indeed 'parasitic upon the very knowledge and understanding that they are supposed to be explicating' (225) was true. Was this a meaningless layer, a hoop academics had to jump through, whilst assessment and teaching – the other two key components of the constructive alignment model – happened not according to, but *despite* learning outcomes? Did the students understand the importance of learning outcomes in the process? Did teachers? All these were questions which I felt needed to be answered through systematic inquiry into current practice at my institution, but also beyond.

Context

The research was carried out within the context of the first core module[3] of a three-year postgraduate certificate in academic practice course (PCAP) which forms a probationary requirement for new academic staff in a research-led university in the UK.[4] Staff participating in this first module have fewer than three years' experience of teaching in UKHE, with many being responsible for the design and delivery of their own modules for the first time.[5] During this module, participants are supported in understanding key concepts in learning and teaching in HE. As part of this module, there is a discussion of how the constructive alignment model works, in an attempt to help staff go beyond formulaic uses of learning outcomes towards a deeper, more meaningful understanding and use which can ultimately benefit students. At the same time, participants are encouraged to take a critical approach to this practice, discussing its use and applicability in their disciplinary contexts.

On Day 4 of the module, we discuss assessment and constructive alignment, and the 'ideal' characteristics of learning outcomes, as outlined in Norman Jackson's 'Guide for Busy Academics'. Part of the exercise is to compare those ideal characteristics of learning outcomes with the learning outcomes included on the descriptors of modules/programmes course participants are involved with, either as part of a teaching team or as leads. The purpose is to juxtapose practice on the ground with the principles which underpin the

adoption of the constructive alignment model. Some of the initial responses were staggering. Observations such as 'I've inherited this module and this is the first time I've seen this' or 'these learning outcomes are out of date and irrelevant' were worryingly common – too common to ascribe to pockets of outdated practice. Others noted that there were way too many learning outcomes (with a record of 17 so far) or that they were using very simplistic language to explain what the students would be able to do by the end of the course, such as the verbs 'understand' and 'appreciate' which would be difficult to assess accurately. Others simply included a list of the module contents in bullet point format, conflating learning outcomes with 'syllabus'. This of course goes counter to the very purpose of learning outcomes that they are intended to communicate to students not the content of a course, but what they are expected to be able to do with that content. Although there were some exceptions where care was clearly taken to design learning outcomes with a constructive alignment in mind, in the majority of cases there was a major lack of connection between the official (module descriptor) and the actual (what was happening in the classroom).

These anecdotal and sporadic interactions created the need to investigate and challenge further my own assumptions about my participants' knowledge and understanding of learning outcomes. I decided to focus on key questions around the use of learning outcomes in practice, and perceptions of their functions and usefulness to students.

Methods and survey population

The data were gathered through a questionnaire which allowed for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The same questionnaire was used in two subsequent years across six iterations of the course. The questionnaire included Yes/No questions and 'paragraph/how?' questions. The latter were analysed around some key concepts which were prominent and recurrent (such as 'focus', 'structure' and 'expectations', for example). These qualitative data were coded to allow for deeper insights into perceptions and practice. In total, 94 questionnaires from a total of 140 course participants were collected: 54 from the first year (total = 71) and 40 from the second (total = 69). The questionnaire was distributed in the morning of Day 4 which discusses the topic of constructive alignment and learning outcomes, but *before* any activity on this topic took place, and before any reading was assigned or discussed. These took about 5–10 minutes to complete, and were completed individually on a voluntary basis, with the terms of their participation and the purpose of the project made explicit, as per the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association.

In terms of the characteristics of the survey population, all participants have had fewer than three years' experience of teaching in the UKHE system.[6] There was a wide disciplinary spread, as can be seen from Table 1, although there was a considerable percentage coming from a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) background:

In terms of gender, there were a total of 81 men and 59 women, which was owed to the overwhelming number of male participants from STEM disciplines (male/female ratio of 2.5/1). This reflects conditions in STEM disciplines more widely (House of Commons 2014; RSC 2014) (Table 2).

Results and analysis

The data paint a very colourful picture. It would be difficult to distil the responses to one or two prevalent understandings of learning outcomes and their functions. I would

Table 1. PCAP module 1 participants by discipline (using the Higher Education Academy's discipline categorisation) in 2013–2015.

Arts and Humanities	Health and Social Care	Social Sciences	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)	Total
18	27	35	60	140

argue that there is on the whole lack of clarity as to the precise function of learning outcomes. If we agree to take Biggs' definition and characteristics as a starting point, we agree that learning outcomes should be statements of what the learner will be able to do after the learning activity (session or course) (Biggs and Tang 2007, 70). In that respect, none of the respondents went beyond the term 'expectations' to explain learning outcomes as measurable demonstrations of learning.

Most respondents stated that they were aware of learning outcomes and found them useful in their teaching (see Figure 1). A total of 79 out of 94 answered yes to this question. At first sight this was a good response which perhaps shows that there is at least awareness of learning outcomes.

However, the response to the question 'Are learning outcomes explicitly linked to assessment?' was less reassuring, with over a third of responses negative or unsure as to whether this was the case or not (Figure 2).

Finally, when the participants were asked as to whether their students found learning outcomes useful,[7] the responses showed a different picture, with less than half respondents confident that this was the case (Figure 3).

Looking only at these data, one may assume that they justify the QAA's assertion that 'most departments and institutions have fully adopted the principles of learning outcomes', as the majority of the respondents indicated that they found them useful in their teaching. Perhaps some work needs to be done to strengthen the links between learning outcomes and assessment. Finally, communication with students seems to be an area for future focus, as the figures show, and this despite the fact that a large number of respondents indicated that a key function of learning outcomes is to communicate and clarify our expectations to students.

However, when the qualitative data from the 'how?' text boxes under each Yes/No question were analysed, a different picture emerged. It soon became clear that amongst the respondents there were varying understandings as to the purpose and function of learning outcomes.

When it comes to the functions of learning outcomes for teachers, the most dominant impressions were that learning outcomes were useful as guidance to teachers for focusing, planning and organising the delivery of teaching (56 mentions), something which was also highlighted in the research by Dobbins et al. (2014). A respondent

Table 2. PCAP module 1 participants by discipline and gender.

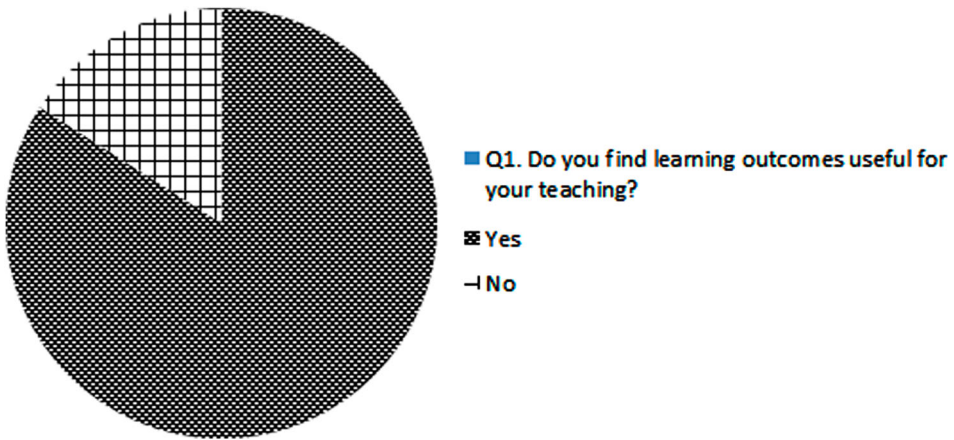|	Arts and Humanities		Social Sciences		Medical and Health		STEM		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Total	8	10	18	18	12	14	43	17	140

Figure 1.　Responses to question 1.

from Engineering commented that learning outcomes 'help me to structure the module, be more focus[ed]' (QR20), whilst another respondent from the Business School commented that 'they help structure module content and design, which is useful in planning and delivering the material' (QR02).

When investigated further, the data suggest that the function of learning outcomes as a planning tool is in most cases a tool for mapping the *content* of the module. They are very content and teacher-centric in that sense, as they offer a structured outline of the content to be covered in the course, thereby helping the teacher organise their content accordingly. Many considered them as content guides, often a series of bullet points outlining the content of the course to be taught, a 'curriculum by another name' as someone expressed it – thus also conflating terms. A respondent stated that 'learning outcomes are like the "table of contents"' (QR59). Another respondent from Medical Sciences commented that 'in my department people [*n. meaning staff*] tend to think of them as a tick list of things they want students to recall/memorise'
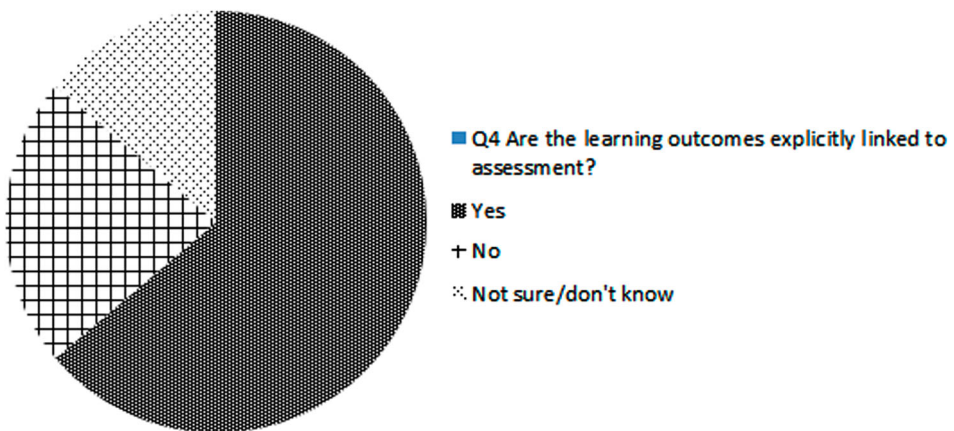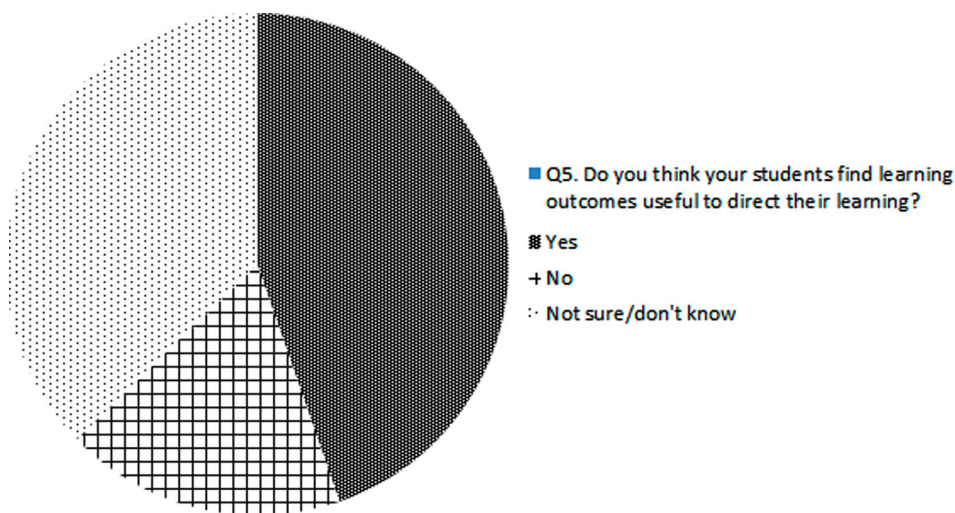

Figure 2.　Responses to question 4.

Figure 3.   Responses to question 5.

(QR66), a view which seems to be confirmed with the response of another participant from Medical Sciences: '[learning outcomes] can be used to remind of what has been covered. It is a concise summary of what is in a long complicated lesson. [T]hese are often mapped to contents chapters of key textbooks' (QR33). Another Medical Sciences respondent stated that 'I was never concerned with learning outcomes. I just get given topics to teach and I teach them how I was taught!' [exclamation in original], demonstrating perhaps a lack of communication of a team-taught module's overall aims and specific outcomes to different teachers.

Although in theory most respondents stated that they found learning outcomes useful (Figure 1), the learning outcomes they mostly meant were used as a syllabus. Where learning outcomes were perceived as a 'table of contents', they clearly are used to indicate what each lecture will cover, leading to a distorted application of the constructive alignment model, which starts with learning outcomes as content, sees teaching as content delivery, and assessment as content retrieval from students as the final stage.

Although learning outcomes are seen as mostly important as guidance and design tools, they do not seem to be utilised as a constant underpinning for the design of learning activities and, crucially, assessment, the three key components of the constructive alignment model. Only 16 out of 94 respondents made any mention of assessment in qualitative responses, which perhaps shows that even though there is a wide belief that learning outcomes are explicitly linked to assessment (Figure 2), it is unclear how this is done, – except in the cases where content drives the whole design of activities *and* assessment. This is evident from the paragraph responses to this question, where participants were very unsure as to whether and exactly how this was done. Some suggested that the relationship between learning outcomes and assessment was 'implicit' (QR35, 38), rather than explicit or 'indirect' (QR49). Others considered this to be a logical connection but were uncertain of its existence: 'I assume so in theory' (QR63), 'probably should be' 'sometimes'. A respondent from Sports and Exercise Sciences stated that each lecture in a module covered a different learning

outcome, and was also confident that as the assessment assessed the content of the lectures, this meant that it naturally assessed those learning outcomes (QR71).

Some respondents indicated that learning outcomes can be restrictive if they are too prescriptive (5 mentions). A respondent from the Business School commented that 'they are too broad' to be useful to either staff or students (QR24), whilst a respondent from Medical Sciences stated that they deliberately make learning outcomes 'short and vague' (QR27).

Only two respondents mentioned accountability, with 'accreditation' and 'box-ticking' (QR18) also appearing twice, – suggesting that perhaps the apparent cynicism of more experienced academic staff is yet to permeate early – careers colleagues' perceptions.

When it came to the function of learning outcomes for the students, by far the most frequent response was that they are useful for communicating our expectations to our students (28 mentions). Guidance was another prominent function (19 mentions), followed closely by the setting of goals/objectives (18 mentions). Less frequent observations included 'clarity' (9 mentions), 'focus' (5), 'communication' (4), 'emphasis on key points' (5), 'content/syllabus' (6), whilst tellingly only 10 participants thought that students link or associate learning outcomes with assessment.

What this evidence clearly shows is that amongst this particular category of staff at this institution, there is a distinct lack of clarity as to the purpose and function of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are most certainly not seen to function as the key element defining learning activities and the assessment, as per the constructive alignment model. Far from the seemingly binary choice between a conformist and a critical stance as outlined above, where we all take sides in the battle between the behaviourist and constructivist forces, what actually reigns supreme is a spectrum of different and arbitrary understandings, applications and practices, most of whom have little to do with the model put forward by the QAA in 2007, or indeed by Biggs. It is a safe bet that whilst we have standardised processes of module specification approval and quality control, the principles of learning outcomes and constructive alignment are yet to permeate where it matters: where the teaching and learning takes place. There is *an* adaptation of the learning outcomes, but it appears to be superficial and irrelevant to Biggs' intention.

On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of respondents steered clear from a 'pragmatic' or 'cynical' approach to learning outcomes, with the term 'box-ticking' mentioned only twice, whilst another participant was concerned with the potential for using learning outcomes to 'monitor teaching activities and manage lecturers', which echoes the concerns of Ritzer and others as discussed above. Two other respondents thought that learning outcomes may be potentially restrictive if they are too prescriptive. It is possible that because of the participants' relative lack of extensive experience with module design and approval processes they were less aware of the bureaucratic procedures than more experienced and senior staff. One question that needs to be asked is: once staff complete their compulsory teaching qualification (such as the PCAP), is there much support on the ground for *continuing* and expanding good practice? Do they have much opportunity to continue with a scholarly approach to their teaching, as well as influence procedures and general practice?

Implications for future research

This evidence raises a number of questions: firstly, we need to clarify further what seems to be a prevalent perception of learning outcomes as tables of content or syllabus 'granularisation' tools. Secondly, it is worth investigating through ethnographic

research what learning outcomes look like for teachers. How they are presented, required and fulfilled. What contributes to their (mis)understanding as syllabus or content guides? What also encourages the 'learning outcomes-as-box-ticking' mentality which is sometimes evident?

Another aspect which is particularly concerning is that, despite quality assurance processes and procedures, with rigorous scrutiny of module and programme specification documentation, and extremely costly preparations for institutional audits, – not to mention the audits themselves, the frequency with which we observe learning outcomes which are entirely contrary to Biggs' model (numerous, vague and/or describing process or content) suggests that the uniform adaptation of the learning outcomes model at the top level was not accompanied with any in-depth knowledge of their value to learning, or the theory behind the constructive alignment model. This would seem to justify Hussey and Smith's position that learning outcomes are a bureaucratic process which is 'parasitic' on the education system, rather than ensuring its effectiveness (2002, 221). If, as we thought in 2007, the constructive alignment model is well established and used throughout UKHE, how can we still encounter the phenomena of 'inherited' modules, teachers with no understanding of (or input into) their own modules' learning outcomes, and module specifications with invalid learning outcomes? It is simply not enough to expect teachers to become more aware of the principles of constructive alignment and its role in the process. Module and programme administrators and managers, QAA staff both locally and nationally should be experts; experts in the very model they have been propagating and auditing since the late 1990s.

Finally, and most crucially, there is a distinct lack of evidence post-implementation of the learning outcomes model. Kerry Dobbins and the Learning Outcomes Project have started to build an increasingly solid evidence base, – especially with regard to the practices of teaching staff in UKHE. What is conspicuous by its absence, however, is the voice of those who are supposedly at the heart of the system (according to both the learning outcomes proponents and the UK Government's 2011 White Paper), the students. Student voices have so far been ignored in the research on learning outcomes, with very few notable examples, such as Skinner's work, which looked at student perceptions thereof (Skinner 2014).

This project will focus more closely on the uses of learning outcomes in humanities contexts, where, according to Entwistle (2005, 76), theories are contested and there is 'much more room for personal interpretation of evidence', making the implementation of learning outcomes difficult (8). It will also focus closely on student views of learning outcomes, in order to ascertain whether constructive alignment exists as a result of the implementation of learning outcomes at a module level.

Open questions

We find ourselves at an impasse. Learning outcomes can be seen as a number of things. Tools for managerial control, quality control in the hands of the post-Thatcher managers of the McUniversity (Hartley 1995; Parker and Jary 1995); labels for products with commercial and social/totemic value (Brancaleone and O'Brien 2011); quintessential elements of constructive curriculum design; measurable targets upon which both teaching and assessment should be based (Biggs and Collis 1982; Biggs 1999a); benchmarks for quality assurance, external scrutiny and accountability (Jackson 2002).

It seems that at the end of every heated debate, we find the same question: what is the purpose of universities? We constantly find ourselves divided into behaviourists and

constructivists, positivists and interpretivists, fact focused or concept focused, industry/ market oriented or citizenship oriented. And at the heart of this debate lies the same question, the same problem; that we have varied and often conflicting views as to the purpose of HE. Although recently HE has been linked directly with the 'needs' of the economy and prospective employers, we can do well to remember that the role of education should go beyond that of individual material gain and careerism. Barnett distils the purpose of HE to 'the development of the student's autonomy as a self-sufficient rational inquirer' (1988, 245). Qualification, according to Biesta, is only *one* of the purposes of education – in a way the easiest to achieve. He also discusses *socialisation* (into disciplinary ways of doing and being) and *subjectification*, – the development of students into autonomous and independent thinkers: 'any education worthy of its name should always contribute to processes of subjectification that allow those being educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting' (41). In that respect, learning outcomes, and curriculum design, can only go so far in their role as descriptors of what happens in education.

Focusing too much on quality control and measurability elevates learning outcomes and other such signifiers, such as research excellence rankings, university rankings and other over-simplistic classifications and manifestations of the McDonaldization paradigm, from the status of – at best – helping tools to that of the most important element in the process. As Biesta suggests, if we value what we can measure (instead of measuring what we value), we risk being in a world where rankings and measurements become the essence of HE; where 'targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality themselves' (Biesta 2009, 35). Where, to paraphrase Hussey and Smith (2002), the various metrics rule the process, making them the quantifiable tail wagging the unquantifiable dog.

How do we create learning outcomes that are simultaneously useful to regulatory bodies, curriculum designers, teachers and students? How can learning outcomes be precise enough to be measurable on the one hand but also flexible enough to allow the student to construct their own knowledge, to explore, discover, grapple with, dismiss and adopt – and ultimately create – knowledge? How can we turn precisely specified verb categorisations pegged against HE levels of study into launch pads for the educational imagination (Eisner 1979)?

I think it is time to rethink the model. And it is time for teachers to reclaim the responsibility for both quality control and enhancement within their own disciplinary communities, in ways which are meaningful to them and their students.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. The University of Leicester is already hosting a research project on practice with regard to learning outcomes, and it was at the 2014 Society for Research in Higher Education conference in 2014 where I discovered that our aims were shared. The Learning Outcomes Project, http://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/loproject/.

2. In the revised edition of the 1999 book which came out in 2007, Biggs and Tang take an apologetic stance which is sympathetic to the detractors of learning outcomes. Their intention was not to provide managerialism with a control mechanism. Rather, they were concerned with the clarity and transparency of the learning process.
3. The module is called Foundation of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.
4. Such professional development is standard practice in UKHE institutions, and this course is accredited by the Higher Education Academy and is mapped onto its Professional Standards Framework.
5. 'module' in the UK denotes a discreet unit of study, usually over one or two semesters which carries anything between 10 and 40 credits, and which is assessed against predesigned and approved learning outcomes. This is equivalent to the term 'course' used in the US system.
6. This is an enrolment condition: staff with three years' experience or more advance directly to a second module. Experience teaching abroad is only recognised if staff can demonstrate relevance, knowledge or awareness of the UK system. This may have been a factor which influenced the responses.
7. The term 'useful' in these questions was deliberately left vague in order to measure awareness/use of learning outcomes in any shape or form, including such use which may go against the pedagogical principles of the constructive alignment model.

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