



UiO : Department of Educational Research
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‘Learning Outcomes in universities: how are they interpreted and practiced in Norway and England?’

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Aim today

- Introduce my project
- Present some results from a paper underway
- Talk about broader challenges and choices:
 - How to research ‘things Like’ LOs? What perspectives can I draw on?
 - How to make my project critical and useful?

1. The project : HELOs

Learning outcomes in HE

- Why these now? Bologna process and European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

“Statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning”.

- make degree programmes more transparent, consistent and comparable (Adam, 2008).
- Key feature of a shift from focus on inputs, activities or processes in HE
→ outcomes generated by HE

Course content

The themes of this introductory course are

- introduction to philosophy of social science
- how to formulate research questions
- how to design social science research and the various types of research designs
- introduction to quantitative and qualitative research

Learning outcome

The aim of the course is to provide you with an introduction to social science research methods.

Upon successful completion of the course you are expected to

Knowledge

- have knowledge on various kinds of research questions and research designs
- have basic knowledge on qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research, as well as relevant ethical and philosophical considerations

Skills

- be able to formulate research questions and develop a sufficiently coherent research design
- be able to assess the appropriateness of different kinds of research designs and methodology, for instance in terms of their appropriateness, transparency and quality.

Competence

- develop independent thinking for critically analyzing research reports

Key debates on Learning Outcomes

- Appropriate for learning in HE?
- Can disciplinary difference be accommodated?
- Stated (EU/Bologna) intention shifting: (Sin, 2015)
curricular alignment → changes in teaching paradigm
- Little agreement on what ‘key’ LOs should be
- Linked to new pressure for (standardised) measurement (Ahelo)

Gaps: Implementation hard to assess and poorly understood

- Research on implementation of LOs has focused on formal 'architecture' (e.g. Cedefop, TRENDS)
 - influence on programmes, teachers and students unclear
 - Bologna powers-that-be, know and worry about implementation progress
- Disciplinary differences and national differences known to be problematic, but under-researched
 - (Casperson et al, 2012, Ahelo feasibility studies, REFLEX study)

A challenging issue to study?

- LOs a slippery, often dishonest, 'thing'
- Nature, purpose and likely impact contested
 - Theoretical underpinnings fragmented (Allan, 1996; Prøitz, 2010).
 - Lack of clarity on how to apply them
 - Fuzzy boundary between learning outcomes, objectives and aims
- How should I approach them? What am I studying?
 - The stated policy ? Associated policy tools (EQF)? A broader concept or phenomenon ?

Approach to investigating their implementation

- Look for how they are they *understood* and *used* in practice
 - Across a range of study programmes (comparative)
 - Among different groups: HE leaders, lecturers and students
- Interviews conducted in 2014
 - Interviews with c. 42 respondents
 - 8 ‘paired’ cases, w similar institutions (trad. unis)

Norwegian cases	Inst 1	STEM (applied)
		Humanities (lang/regional)
	Inst 2	STEM (pure)
		Humanities
English cases	Inst 3	STEM (pure)
		Humanities (lang/regional)
	Inst 4	STEM (applied)
		Humanities

Paper underway:

Learning outcomes
and student-
centered learning



"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"

Learning outcomes and a teaching ‘paradigm shift’

- Promoted as tool for radical changes in teaching in HE
 - Teaching a priority, more ‘student-centered learning’
 - A way to get EU reforms to ‘bite’ at the practice level
- Vagueness: what do they mean by student-centered learning?
 - What does SSL mean here? Several versions
 - What mechanisms or processes link these issues?

Approach: do LOs foster student-centered learning?

- Identified 3 links /mechanisms in Bologna statements:
 - Transparency – student choice enhanced?
 - Encouraging ‘alignment’ – programmes more rational and effective
 - Focus attention on the student not the teacher
- Describe a range of ways student centered learning is used
- Interviews offer evidence of these issues and alternative interpretations and practices

Student centered learning?



Student centered learning?

EU/ENQA version:

SSL as a solution to contemporary HE landscape: large, diverse cohorts, students as one of many stakeholder groups who expect tangible results relevant to work.

Enhanced curriculum version:

SSL about planning for alignment, clarity and delivery mechanisms to support better learning approaches, motivation and outcomes (Biggs, Ramsden)

Engagement/emancipatory version:

SSL as about student having more agency and freedom to steer own learning, teacher as facilitator, 'project' of learning; personal and varied.

Results: are LOs an influence?

- Relationship with teaching change is weak and varied:
 - Teachers and students unclear on the meaning/ intention of LOs
 - Helpful for ‘weaker’ or novice teachers, triggers reflection
- BUT are linked with sense of needing to change
 - Student choices and more information
 - the right amount of alignment
 - Students need to describe their learning
 - Clearer learning contract
 - A way to de-privitise’ teaching

Results: what change is desired?

- GOOD TEACHING/ GOOD COURSES?
 - Not about student OR teacher-centered
 - Enthusiasm, personalities, relationships
 - Room to find own interests and path
 - Not hidden curriculum or over-simplifying
 - Resources: size of courses, assessment , feedback – a greater challenges for student-centred approaches

Results: awkward aspects of LOs

- POWER
 - Unclear how students gain more influence or agency
 - Where visible, typically consumer power, contracts
- VARIETY AND IDIOSYNCRASY
 - Tensions between varied interests and abilities of students, and tight curricula or marking rubrics
 - Room for flexibility and judgement
 - Outcomes can only define the average student

Conclusions so far on learning outcomes and student-centred learning

Limited impact on teaching practice: Can help less experienced teachers; can be a spur to reflection and communication

Implied mechanisms (transparency, alignment, focus on students) visible, but don't add up to big change

Meaning and intent of LOs and student-centred learning are vague – who defines them?

Ambiguous relationship with more substantial versions of SSL:
Power moved away from students and teachers

Divert attention from drivers of teaching quality prioritised by teachers and students

3. broader challenges and choices to deal with

How to research 'things Like' LOs? What perspectives can I draw on?

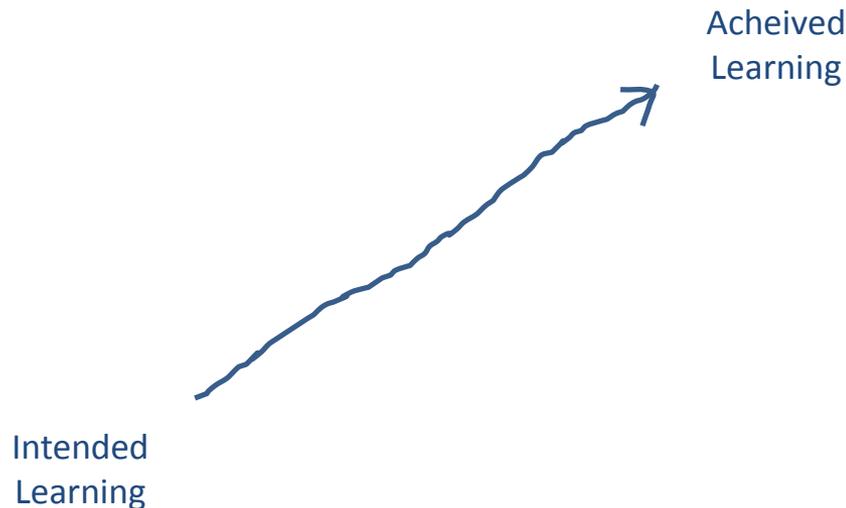
How to be critical and useful?

Where has work so far brought me?

- gaps between stated, intended and actual influence, and the vague mechanisms of influence
- Need approaches/lenses that focus on *the active translation* of policy by those using them, *within specific settings* (national and disciplinary)
 - Implementation as dynamic and shifting: initial roll out, levels of unpacking, varied pace
 - Seems important to problematise and approach LOs critically, while acknowledging some positives

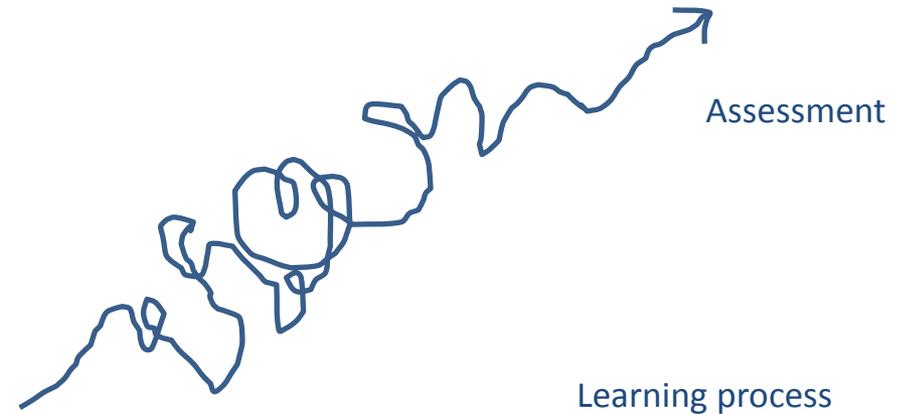
How to bring mess, people, power and learning back in?

Learning



What LO proponents think it looks like

Learning



What it probably looks like

Original thoughts about theory

- Initially thought about some combination of:
- *Pedagogic theories: LOs as a learning intervention*
 - Constructive Alignment, Biggs etc. ; types of learning e.g. higher/lower order learning and taxonomies
 - *Organisational theories: LOs as an management and steering tool*
 - institutional theory; performance indicator theories (definitions provided by Henkel at al); Performativity
- *Comparative policy theories: LOs as a comparative phenomena*
 - Translation (Sahlin); HE traditions and alignment with labour market (Cummings)

Not sure these get as aspects of the existing debate that I want to problematise or focus on

Clarify what I mean by policy and implementation

- Ball, contingent use, policy and text and discourse
 - policy understood/legitimised in relation to national and local changes or challenges (Ball et al, 2014)
 - Policies like LOs developing some more fixed manifestations, but remain open to negotiation and re-casting
- Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) Translation and templates
 - NOT diffusion and imitation (homogenisation / passive implementation)
- Saunders, Trowler, Sin
 - Implementation staircase, social practice: highlight contingent, contextual aspects (problematising rational-purposive assumptions)

Highlight vagueness and power

- Lack of definition, or theory of learning, is important, not incidental
 - Power of definition:

“. . . nothing is more false than the claim that, for a given assertion, *its use is its meaning*. On the contrary, its use may depend upon its lack of meaning, its possession of wholly different and incompatible meanings in different contexts, and the fact that, at the same time, it as it were emits the impression of possessing a consistent meaning. (Gellner 1973: 42, taken from Payne, 2000)”
 - Biesta on power as reeducation of complexity? (2008)
- Who is defining what is to be learnt, and what counts?

How to look at learning?

- Bateson, Ecology of mind
 - Learning as series of nested sets of levels or types
 - Learning a specific thing and meta-learning, or pattern forming always go together
 - Always about interaction, interaction and context
 - LOs example of ‘mistaking the map for the territory’
- Bowden and Marton, The University of Learning, 1998
 - different take on learning outcomes

Consider the kind of results am I aiming at

- Not aspiring to clear causal links between LO descriptions and practices found
- Provisional stabilities (Saunders, 2006)
 - Credible descriptions, suggested mechanisms, useful metaphors

Comments?
Suggestions?
Questions?

Why compare Norway and England?

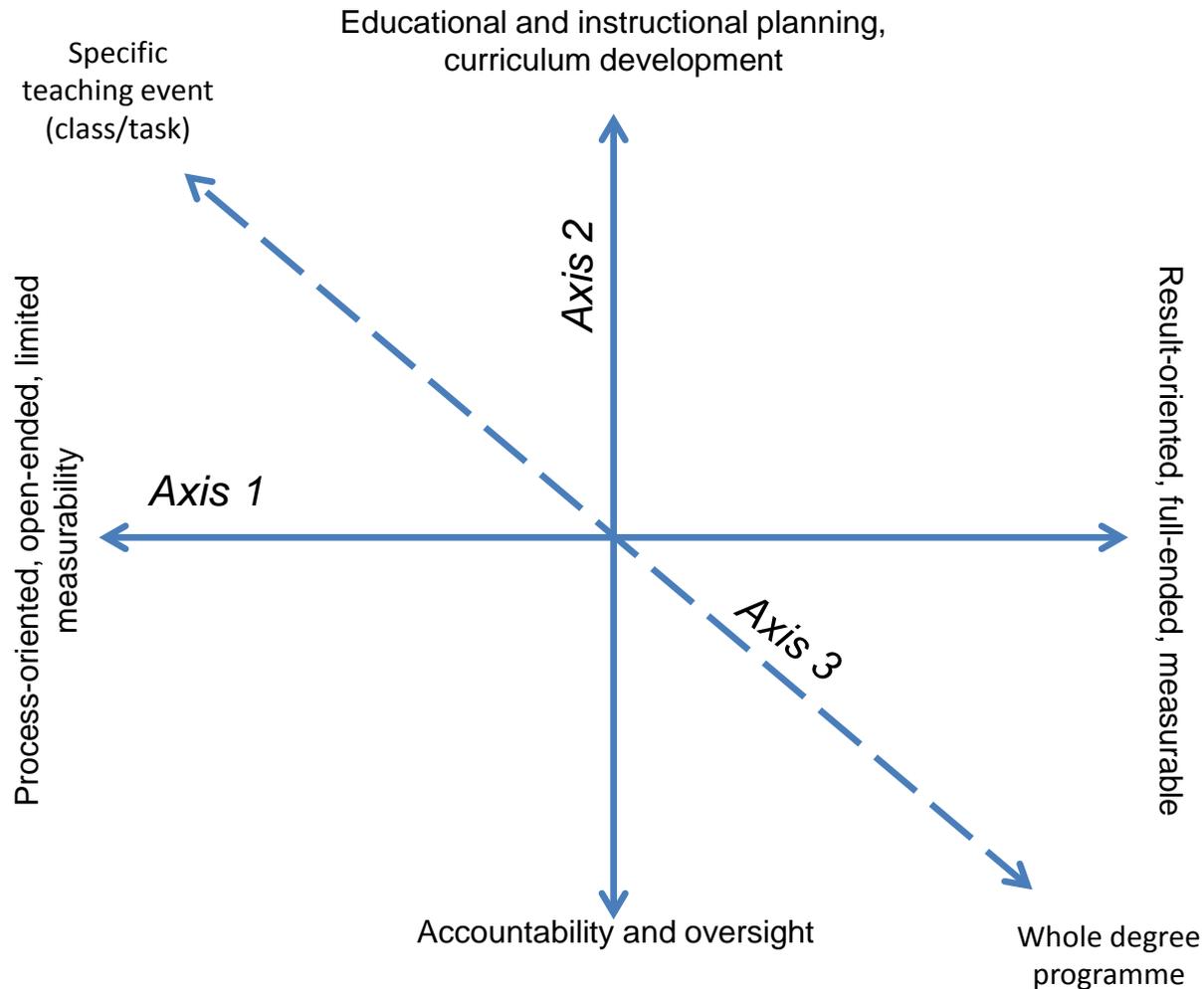
- Contemporary interest in learning outcomes built on logic of harmonisation and comparability:
 - E.g. Harmonisation, transferability, AHELO , generic skills
- Similar but different settings
 - Similar HE structures, monitoring systems, credit systems
 - Contrasting national HE policy traditions, relationship to Europe, recent HE reform priorities, timeframe of implementation

	England	Norway
LO introduction & experience so far (Prøitz, 2014; Helgøy & Homme, 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -England 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 - New quality assurance system makes LOs more central 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Norwegian experience of LOs later and more sudden - Rapid uptake of the EQF and LO approaches since 2005. LOs in degree progs by 2012. - ‘Kunnskapsløftet’ marked shift from input to outcome orientations
Relationship to EU Higher ed. policy (esp. EQF alignment) (Helgøy & Homme 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘Ahead of’ reforms (little change needed) - Low awareness of EU role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formally distant (non-EU) BUT increasingly seen as an ‘eager beaver’ in certain areas.
National HE reform traditions / centralisation (Kogan et al. (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘Heroic’ & centrally driven, even if influence often mediated through ‘buffer’ / ‘intermediary’ agencies (for funding, quality) - “Strong hand” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incremental & negotiated, major reforms seen as more ‘technical’ and pragmatic/modernizing - “Steady hand”
Mode of/ extent of Autonomy (traditional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High institutional autonomy, Low academic autonomy (in teaching/learning) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low institutional autonomy, High academic autonomy (in teaching/learning)
Student position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heavy consumer-orientation with high fees (up to £9000 p/year) - Challenging graduate labour market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weaker consumer orientation, with free higher education - Robust graduate labour market

Paper on the ‘translation’ of LOs

- Needed to establish some framework for potential range in their interpretation and implementation
 - Prøitz (2010) "*Learning outcomes: What are they? Who defines them? When and where are they defined?*"
 - theoretical discussion around outcomes: two continuums of variations in understanding what they are/ are for
 - Hussey & Smith (2008) "*Learning outcomes: a conceptual analysis.*"
 - Analyses use of LOs by level of application in HE, suggest three distinct levels

LOs: three axes of variation



Key findings

- Commonly used in planning/curriculum updating
 - Can be ‘thin’ e.g. a box to be filled out
 - But often a process of communication, re-interpreting, reflecting
- Not felt to shape teaching approach, though starting to influence assessment approach
 - And course- or degree-level level outcomes felt to be too broad for use as immediate teaching ‘tools’
 - Assessment hard to link directly to LOs in many cases, more work to be done

The cultural issue is key... 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.

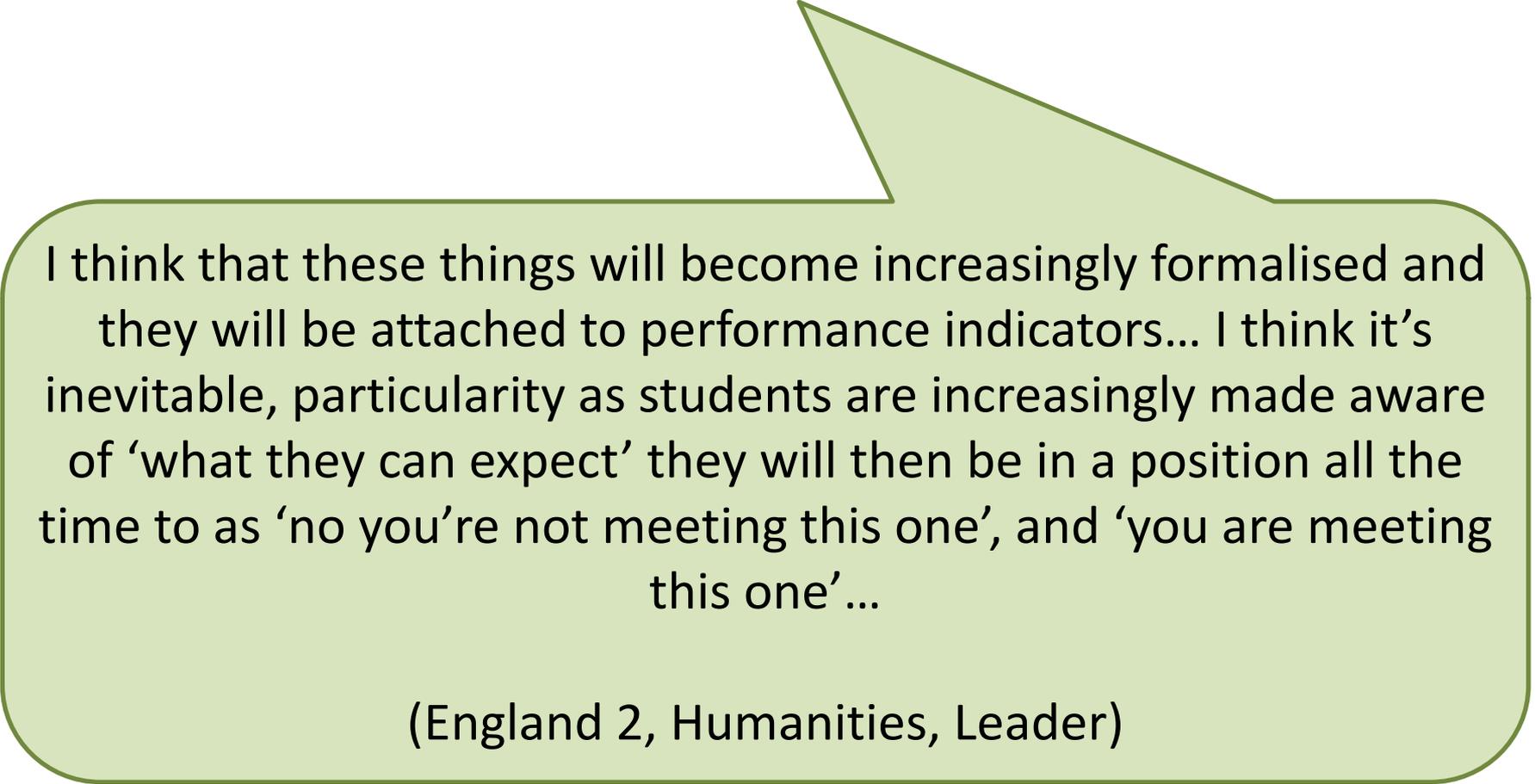
(Norway 4, STEM, lecturer)

Well I think it is always a really good thing to have time to reflect on the teaching that you do. You can end up just charging through modules a bit.

(EA2, Humanities, Lecturer)

Key findings

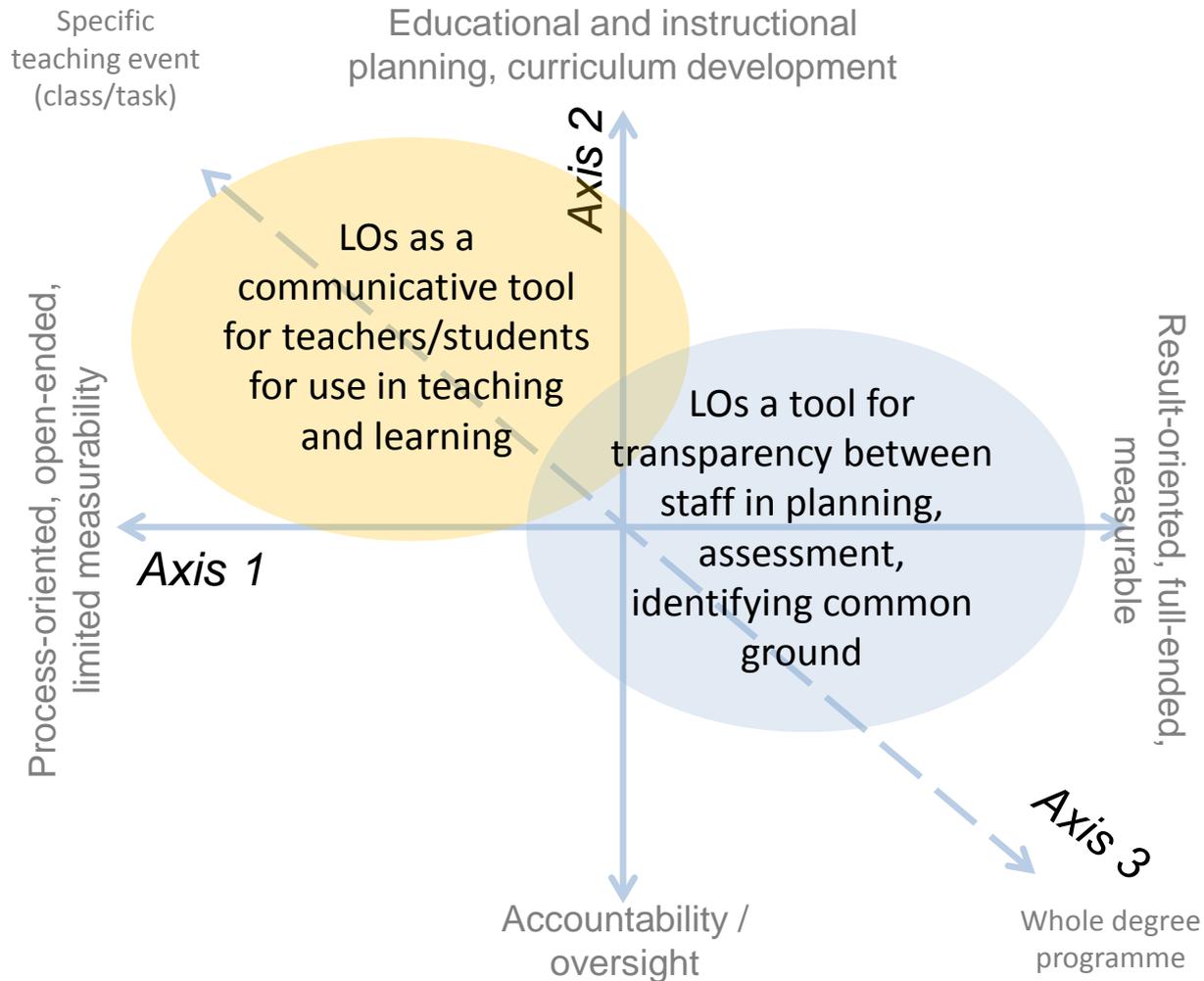
- Several management and steering functions emerging:
 - New opportunities for performance indicators and measurement on the way (for use by institution, national bodies, quality agencies) (+Eng.)
 - new space for managerial/ oversight roles - Increased role for heads of programme / departmental bodies
 - Provide new legitimacy for teachers' work to be overseen and questioned (+Nor)



I think that these things will become increasingly formalised and they will be attached to performance indicators... I think it's inevitable, particularly as students are increasingly made aware of 'what they can expect' they will then be in a position all the time to as 'no you're not meeting this one', and 'you are meeting this one'...

(England 2, Humanities, Leader)

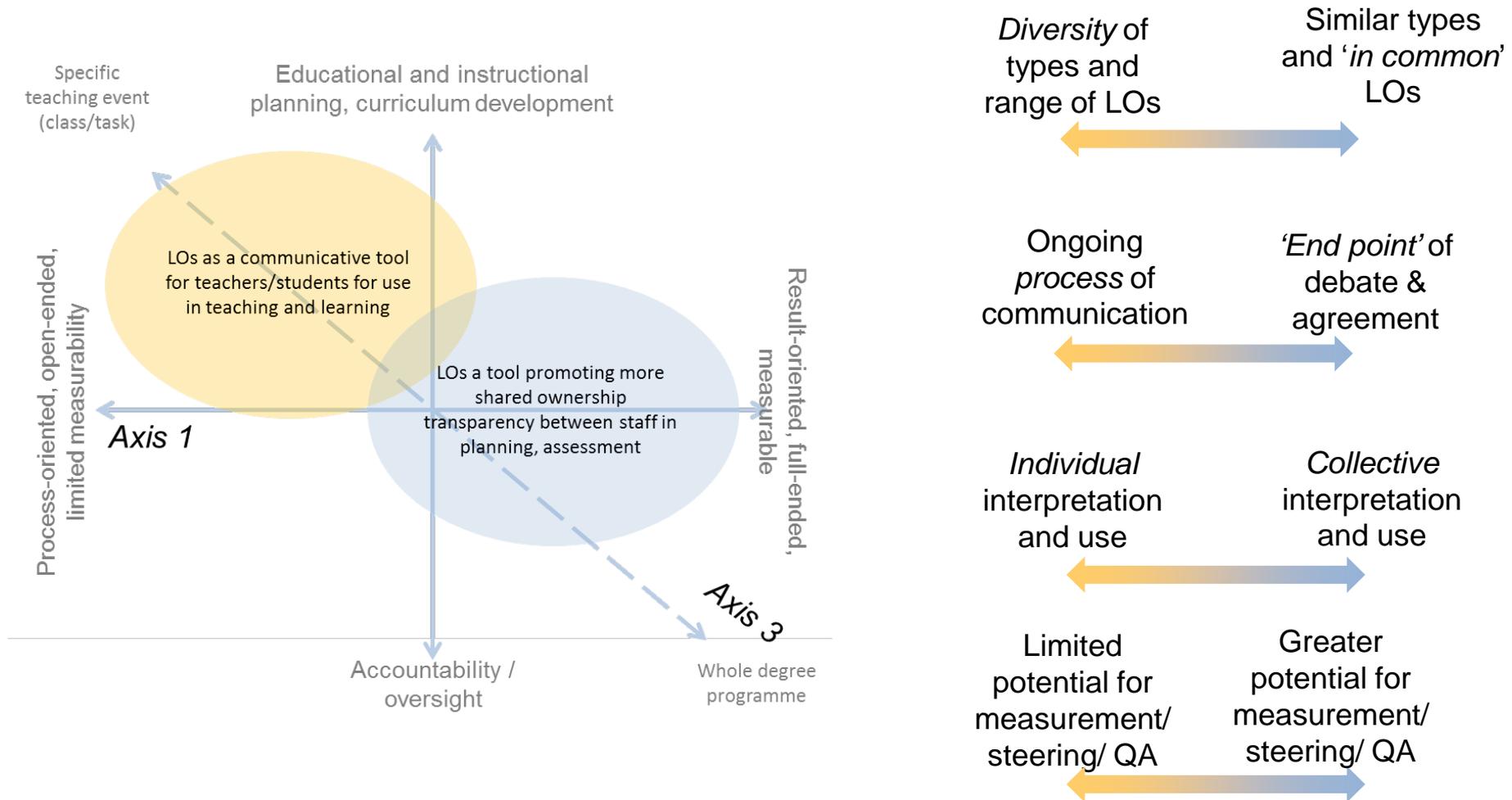
2 common tendencies



Revisting the 3 axes: 2 'tendencies'

	Top left	Bottom right
LOs primarily useful as...	Focus on individual reflection and communication with students as learners	Focus on developing common ground and standards, and communicating with potential students
Driven by...	those teaching, in line with personal / disciplinary practices	leader / coordinator roles aiming to link up individuals across diverse views
Level	Module/course	Whole degree
Types of LOs	Diverse types included and expected (esp. in humanities)	Focus on 'core' or most common LOs
Measurability and assessment	Recognised challenges with concrete/ measureable LOs. Looser links to assessment	Attempts to concretise and specify LOs to point where more explicit links to assessment possible

Tensions between these?



Seems unlikely these tendencies can continue to develop and work in parallel if outcome idea is increasingly embedded/ used

Variations across settings?

- Contingent translation: filling in the blanks based on immediate pressures and wider reform priorities
- Respondents relate their views and experiences of LOs to local processes and contexts
 - Meaning and intent of learning outcome interpreted via broader policy agendas / dominant national concerns
 - Looked at potential uses through issues 'under pressure' in immediate setting

Conclusions so far on translation and variation

Signs of two broad tendencies in use of learning outcomes
across cases

Variations in national and departmental experiences linked to
wider HE setting and locally dominant agendas/concerns

England

- Key features:
 - New high-fees landscape is THE defining concern
 - Academics and leaders used to teaching subject to external scrutiny
 - Skills and outcomes ideas widespread: idea of LOs 'collapsed into' concerns re. final grades and employability
- LOs translated as a 'solution' to issues of:
 - Ways of communicating to students, and recruiting students ,with a more consumerised role and defending against complaints

I mean what's happening at the moment is very bound up with the introduction of tuition fees. There is a lot going on to do with saying, well what will students expect, what do they actually need, and how do those two things relate to each other?

(England 1, Humanities, Head of Department)

We maybe tend to see them as a defensive shield to be able to say to the students after the modules, "look, we told you what you needed to learn, we've assessed you on those criteria, you have no complaints if you haven't hit that requirement."

(EA2, Sub 2, Lecturer)

Norway

- Key features:
 - LOs integral to broader of standardization/ modernisation of teaching and efforts to raise quality
 - Recent traditions of academic autonomy much stronger, so more stress on need for engagement & acceptance by teachers
 - Different kinds of concerns re. students: want to improve retention and performance
- LOs translated as a 'solution' to issues of:
 - Mobilising (or forcing) renewed efforts around teaching , to move away from 'privatised teaching' and ensure a clearer 'pathway' for students in HE

The University has not [in the past] focused so much on how to develop good teachers, but on research. We have no guidelines or requirements in relation to the role of the teacher. That says something. We have to get away from 'private practice' and develop teaching skills to get from the goals of teaching into our actual activities.

(Norway 1, Humanities, Leader)