

# Linking higher education and the world of work: learning outcomes and intermediary organizations

Mari Elken & Silje Maria Tellmann

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to demonstrate relevance of the education provided and establish tighter links with the labour market. The introduction of learning outcomes represents one such development. The article examines the extent to which various intermediary organizations are involved in decisions about learning outcomes and the consequences of this regarding the role of learning outcomes and their potential in linking higher education to the world of work. Intermediary organizations are operationalised as professional associations and trade unions. The empirical material includes data from interviews of 14 intermediary organizations with different ties to higher education. The findings show that organizations have distinctly different approaches to their involvement in learning outcome development as well as different views on the potentials of learning outcomes as a legitimate instrument to increase the relevance of higher education. Instead of creating new links between higher education and the world of work, the processes of introducing learning outcomes reinforces existing collaboration patterns.

**Keywords:** learning outcomes, professional organizations, higher education

## Introduction

Higher education systems across Europe are going through widespread change process, where issues of quality, efficiency and relevance have become high on the agenda. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to be more transparent and open towards the society. The introduction of learning outcomes is one of the change processes that can be associated with this development. While learning outcomes is a theme that has recently gained increasing attention in scholarly literature, it has usually been studied from an ‘inside’-perspective where learning outcomes are primarily studied from the perspective of higher education. Much less is known how the introduction of learning outcomes has been viewed by labour market representatives.

Analysis of the introduction of learning outcomes has pointed out that the manner in which learning outcomes can be viewed as a process of instrumentalization, by emphasizing

measurability and performance (Hussey & Smith, 2002). Other studies have examined the relationship between learning outcomes and student learning (Dobbins, Brooks, Scott, Rawlinson, & Norman, 2014; Havnes & Prøitz, 2016; Sin, 2014; Sweetman, 2017) and their role as management tools (Bleiklie, Frølich, Sweetman, & Henkel, 2017). While the spread of learning outcomes is sometimes framed as a generic phenomenon, it has also become clear that they become shaped by different disciplinary (Caspersen, Frølich, Karlsen, & Aamodt, 2014; Entwistle, 2005; Michelsen, Vabø, Kvilhaugsvik, & Kvam, 2017; Sweetman, Hovdhaugen, & Karlsen, 2014), organizational (Caspersen, Frølich, & Muller, 2017) and national contexts (Prøitz, Havnes, Briggs, & Scott, 2017; Sin, 2014; Sweetman et al., 2014). While these studies have noted the role of learning outcomes being a buffer between higher education and the world of work (Michelsen et al., 2017), there is limited information on how this buffering is viewed from the outside. If the aim of learning outcomes is to make education more transparent by explicating the skills and knowledge students acquire and in this manner create new linkages to the labour market, do learning outcomes deliver this promise?

This article focuses on the involvement of a subset of labour market organizations in the development of learning outcomes, namely professional organizations. The main aim is to identify how such organizations respond to the introduction of learning outcomes; and whether, and if so how, the introduction of learning outcomes has brought about new or tighter linkages between these organizations and the higher education institutions.

Professional organizations can be viewed as intermediary organizations, positioned between HEIs and the labour market. They are organizations with individual members and their main task is to represent the interests of the profession and the norms and values of their professional community on various arenas in society (Nerland & Karseth, 2015). To contrast the position of professional organizations, the study also sheds light on other forms of organized interests that have in some sense similar but functionally different role – i.e. union confederations and hybrid organizations. Such organizations represent a broader member base than professional organizations and are expected to have looser linkages to HEIs. Both types of organisations can be expected to have a stake in discussions about levels of competence among their members, yet one can expect that they would have different claims on knowledge content of education. Comparison of the two allows for a more nuanced analysis into the role of learning outcomes in (re-)negotiating relevance and shaping linkages between higher

education and the labour market. In this manner, the article also aims to connect two somewhat disconnected views on the relationship between professional interests and HEIs. In studies of higher education, organized interests at the labour market are often black-boxed as part of a complex but disconnected ‘external environment’. Similarly, studies of professional associations do not always pay attention to the dynamics of higher education organizations.

Analytically, the study builds on a neo-institutional tradition as well as the sociology of professions, by viewing various professions as distinct organizational fields with different professional and social dynamics. Empirically, the point of departure of this paper is the involvement of professional organizations and union confederations in the development of learning outcomes in Norwegian higher education study programmes. The article builds on interviews with 9 professional organizations, 2 overarching union confederations, and 3 of what can be seen as hybrid organizations. Details about the interview process and the categories are further specified in the methodological section.

In the next section we present the background for this study, followed by a conceptualisation of the nature of these intermediary organizations and the kind of responses that can be expected, drawing on the notion of organizational fields. We then present the methodological approach and then turn to presenting the empirical material. The final section outlines the key contributions of this study.

## **Background**

Learning outcomes are expected to prescribe the outcome of an education, as they express what students should have learnt after the end of a higher education course or programme. Their roots can be found in the educational ideas of formulating specific learning objectives, yet learning outcomes turn aspirational statements of educational objectives into specific statements of what students know, their field-related skills, and their wider set of competencies that they have acquired through completing an educational programme. The introduction of learning outcomes has become an essential element of curriculum design all over the world (Prøitz et al., 2017). The introduction of learning outcomes in Europe in their current form is widely related to the introduction of qualification frameworks in the context of EU and the Bologna Process.

As qualifications framework and learning outcomes have been introduced as a part of a Europe-wide reform process, this has had consequences for the way in which learning outcomes are conceptualised on national level, often following the European template (i.e. widespread adoption of 8 level frameworks, and division of learning outcomes into knowledge, skills and general competencies). While this European process was initially presented as a technical and value free process, research has pointed towards an implicit reform agenda that is embedded into the process (Bohlinger, 2019; Cort, 2010; Elken, 2015, 2016) – emphasizing among other things lifelong learning, validation of non/in-formal learning, and stronger links to the labour market. Yet, learning-outcome based qualifications frameworks are presented as a policy solution for a multitude of possible policy issues, making them ambiguous and open for various actors to infuse them with meaning (Caspersen et al., 2017). Some of the key rationales in the policy domain are that using learning outcomes would make qualifications more transparent and thus contribute to employability as content of education becomes more readable (Elken, 2016; Knight & Yorke, 2003).

In Norway, the introduction of learning outcomes took place in this wider European policy context. The Norwegian Qualifications Framework (NQF) was formally introduced in 2011, but the process had in some form already started around 2006 (Elken, 2016). The framework follows the main logic presented in European frameworks, by distinguishing between knowledge, skills and general competencies. Several labour market actors took part in a workgroup established by the Ministry of Education to advise in the formulation of the National Qualifications Framework (NKR, 2011, p. 4). Arguably, this can be seen as expected, given that the involvement of organized interests is one of the cornerstones of the Nordic political model, characterised by political interest exchange facilitated by the mutual dependency between the state and the organized interests in different segments of society (Christensen, 2005). Yet, learning outcomes are viewed as an institutional responsibility of individual study programmes. The recommended broader follow-up arena for work with the NQF were the professional/disciplinary councils of The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR). The formulation is rather ambiguous and not sanctioned by any specific follow-up mechanism. Thus, higher education institutions and labour market organizations have a degree of discretion for whether and how they should follow up the NQF. Nevertheless, since the introduction of the NQF in Norway, emphasis on societal relevance has remained high on the agenda.

It has been argued that qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes mark a commodification process, where the inclusion of external stakeholders to decisions about “what education should teach” is used to try to solve the issue of societal relevance (Allais, 2014, p. 140). While there is still considerable ambiguity concerning the manner in which learning outcomes influence educational practices, studies have emphasized that the process is not insignificant nor merely symbolic (Sweetman, 2019). Focus on learning outcomes represents a deliberate effort to make earlier, more institution based qualification systems more open, accountable, transparent and flexible (Young & Allais, 2011, p. 212). By clearly stipulating the knowledge that a candidate from a degree programme is expected to know after completing their education, learning outcomes also represent a potential arena for making claims about the knowledge content. In this way, learning outcomes offer a way to articulate the expertise that professionals depend on when they claim jurisdiction over tasks or areas of the labour market (see, for instance, Abbott, 1988). A basic prerequisite is that learning outcomes ought to be viewed as a legitimate site for negotiating the core knowledge of the specific field and the parties involved need to be recognized as being the core actors in that professional field.

Higher education institutions are usually organised around specific disciplinary and professional domains (Clark, 1983), each of which can be expected to have unique links to the labour market. The way in which medical education relates to the world of work is different from that of engineers or teacher education. This organisational fragmentation is an enduring characteristic of higher education institutions, challenging attempts to make higher education institutions more streamlined and coherent organizations (Whitley, 2008) that could facilitate a more standardized set of links to the labour market. Disciplinary nature is also expressed in the way in which learning outcomes are adopted on institutional level (Caspersen et al., 2014; Michelsen et al., 2017; Sweetman et al., 2014). Thus, the field of knowledge becomes an essential factor in studying the role of learning outcomes in the link between higher education and world of work.

### **Analytical approach: Professional associations as regulatory agents**

Professional organizations and other labour market organization operate in specific organizational fields, inhabited by a variety of different groups and actors which interact within a web of different relations and functions. An organizational field consists of

organizations that constitute “a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Professions are regarded as one means to structure fields, along with state and competition (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and professional organizations either normatively or coercively manage conformity within fields (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002).

By organizing professionals, professional organizations could be expected to have a two-fold function in the organizational field. As representatives of large groups of employees, they have an obligation to promote the interests and working conditions of their members on the labour market. Yet as organizations whose member base is employees with higher educational background, professional organizations are also ‘nodal points’ in the intersection between the other labour market actors and the higher education institutions (Nerland and Karseth 2015). Their members’ professional identity and the cognitive content of their expertise is not merely formed in the workplace. It is as much the outcome of learning processes and socialization into a profession taking place in higher education institutions (Noordegraaf, 2011; Smeby, 2008). Professional organizations therefore depend on higher education institutions in developing the academic knowledge base of the professions and outlining the educational content of relevant study programmes. This is furthermore decisive to their capacity to claim and sustain jurisdictional control over ‘their’ work and hence to establish the boundaries of the profession vis-à-vis other professions and organizations on the labour market (Abbott, 1988). This is also what separates professional organizations from union confederations or hybrid organizations whose members are mainly united by a shared affiliation to the labour market, rather than by a shared educational background.

Professional organizations are thus often outlined not simply as interest organizations, but as key regulatory agents in their professional field (Greenwood et al., 2002; Nerland & Karseth, 2015) facilitating interaction and negotiated agreements in the intersection between the state, higher education and the labour market. In addition to a functional argument, professional organizations have a role in maintaining the values and beliefs within professions (Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013). They are arenas for reproduction which facilitate collective agreement regarding the core values and practices of the profession, in boundary management and the construction of external legitimacy (Greenwood et al., 2002). In this way, professional organizations’ role as regulatory agents both contain internal and external functions. Provided

that professional organizations are key regulatory agents in their professional fields, it is perhaps obvious why they can be considered essential actors for shaping the education of the profession by taking part in the development of learning outcomes. Acknowledgement from professional organizations can be seen as a means to legitimate learning outcomes as a representation of education in the profession, providing both internal (within the profession) as well as external (vis a vis other fields) legitimacy, outlining the boundaries of that specific profession or field of knowledge. In less mature fields with ongoing contestations, this can also be strategically used to establish the field or to establish a particular organization as the key professional association for that respective field.

While one can expect that the state, higher education, and the labour market represent distinct institutional spheres with distinct norms, the level of contestation that emerges between these is dependent on the maturity of the field and the extent to which the (potentially temporary) equilibrium of priorities and norms has been achieved (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011, pp. 318-319). This does not imply that fields are static. An equilibrium can be reached at a later stage, even if there is contestation at a given point of time. External changes can provide opportunities and incentives for change in the field, providing opportunities for strategic behaviour. In this context, professional associations can facilitate change within the profession by framing the discourse through which reconstitution of professional identities can take place (Greenwood et al., 2002, p. 59).

The introduction of learning outcomes can be viewed as a potential external change that creates an arena where the content of the profession can be negotiated (Olson, Afdal, & Elken, 2018). The process of formulating learning outcomes can also lead to a formalization process, where previous implicit agreements about core knowledge and boundaries of that knowledge, become formalized and made explicit. As a result, involvement in learning outcome work can thus be seen as a process of creating new linkages, between the institutions offering training (higher education institutions) and those that work on boundary creation of the profession (professional organizations) (Greenwood et al., 2002). Such field structuration process does not only concern new linkages, but has consequences for the logics underpinning the professional field, as well as power relations in the field (Suddaby, Cooper, & Greenwood, 2007). The ability to determine what the core competencies of a profession or field of study is, can thus be seen as an important part of the boundary work that professional organizations engage in. For union confederations as well as hybrid organizations, their

position is somewhat different, given that they traditionally have not had a specific professional jurisdiction.

Having these arguments in mind, competing arguments regarding the way in which organized interests engage in learning outcome processes can be proposed. First, the way in which these organizations approach learning outcomes, would be dependent on the status of the professional field. If learning outcomes are introduced in a field where there is an institutionalized pattern of communication between the higher education institutions and the labour market, one can argue that it would be less likely that learning outcomes would be able to change existing patterns as its novelty would likely not provide added value, thus providing few incentives for diffusing a new practice. The way in which this plays out is dependent on the maturity of organizational fields; in more mature fields inter-organizational patterns of interaction are established and rely on existing infrastructure (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 335), even when the field composes of contradictory underpinning logics (Reay & Hinings, 2009). Thus, changing the degree of centralisation and existing power structure (i.e. who has legitimate say in what core competencies new graduates should have) is more complicated in fields where this is routinized and established. One can accordingly argue that the more mature the field, the more difficult it is to create this kind of change that the introduction of learning outcomes poses, and that various organizations would maintain diversity of profiles.

Second, given that professional organizations are part of a wider set of organized interests across various professions, they can also be seen as a distinct organizational field of their own. In Norway, the tripartite system is institutionalized with well established procedures for public consultation, high degree of interaction between various organizations, with opportunities to emulate approaches and practices (Christensen, 2005). This would give basis for an argument that one could over time expect that various professional organizations would become more similar in the tasks that concern this institutionalized tripartite system. Given that training forms an essential part of gaining access to the labour market, one can expect that there would be some pressure to approach learning outcomes in a similar manner and strengthen links to the higher education institutions. This can either mean accepting them as legitimate arenas for discussions regarding professional knowledge, or not; but it would entail that over time, responses from various professional organizations would become more similar, and that the more 'successful' cases of would be emulated. This would suggest that new



linkages could be created where these previously did not exist, if learning outcomes are perceived as legitimate in this field.

In total, examining the views of organized interests allows for discussions about the legitimacy of learning outcomes as descriptors of relevant knowledge in the field. While high legitimacy among organized interests would not be sufficient to claim that learning outcomes are considered legitimate by the society (as organized interests does not cover other key stakeholder groups such as students and employers), the lack of legitimacy among organized interests can be indicative of a deeper issue for the way in which learning outcomes are being introduced to the system, raising questions of their role, function and aim as mechanisms for enhancing relevance in higher education.

### **Empirical material and methodology**

To study labour market organizations' assessment of and participation in the development of learning outcomes, we conducted qualitative interviews with 15 representatives of 14 strategically selected organizations that consolidate members with higher educational background in Norway.<sup>1</sup> In total, the organizations included in the study cover 12 different professional fields.

In selecting organizations for the study, we profiled the organizations depending on factors that we expected to affect the links between HEIs and organizations in the organizational field and thus the maturity of the fields. Foremost, we selected organizations representing professions with varying degrees of standardization of education (national curriculum or not) as well as varying degrees of occupational closure on the labour market (Freidson, 2001; Larson, 1977). Professional organizations such as those representing nurses represent one end of the spectrum that we expect to have strong links, as education is steered by a national curriculum, and because nurses need to have license to work as a nurse. Hybrid organizations representing social scientists represent the other end of the spectrum, as their education are broad disciplinary programmes without a national curriculum, and they usually hold jobs with no special license or specialization requirements. Additionally, we included trade unions,

---

<sup>1</sup> In the process of recruiting respondents for this study, we approached a total of 20 organizations. The majority of those who declined the request for participation justified this by claiming little knowledge to learning outcomes in their field.

which consolidate an array of more specialized organizations representing members from particular professions and sectors of the labour market.

**Table 1: Included organizations**

	Professional fields/ informants no.	National curriculum	Degree of closure on labor market	Expected links with HEI in the organizational field
Professional organizations	Education (1,2)	Yes	High	Strong/established
	Health (3)			
	Technology (4)			
	Health (5,6,7,8)	No	Medium Low	Expected to strengthen due to LO
	Arts, design and architecture (9)			
	Media (10)			
Hybrid organizations	Health and welfare (11)	No*	Medium	LO
	Social science and humanities (12,13)	No	Low	
Trade unions	Encompassing (14)	Not relevant	Not relevant	Weak
	Employees with higher education (15)			

\*The organization organizes professionals from several different professions, of which some have a national curriculum, whilst others do not.

The majority of the informants were staff employed in the secretariat of the selected organizations. Only three were elected representatives of the organization. The interviews were semi-structured, and allowed for follow-up of issues that appeared throughout. The questions addressed links between organizations and higher education institutions in their field, their expectations towards learning outcomes and whether, and if so how, the organizations had been involved in the process of developing learning outcomes, both nationally and locally. The interviews also opened for general reflections over the content of education and learning outcomes, as well as their assessment of the specific learning outcomes of their field. Finally, respondents were asked to comment upon a set of statements about the purpose and function of learning outcomes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed by both authors. In this process, we focused on patterns of similarity and diversity in the way these organizations engage with learning outcomes,

whether these had in any way changed patterns of interaction with higher education institutions, and how the organizations evaluated the introduction of learning outcomes. Documents from the organizations and from relevant councils and committees that have discussed learning outcomes were also consulted

### **Empirical discussion: developing and implementing learning outcomes**

The selected organizations cover a variety of organizational fields with different links between the labour market, higher education institutions and the professional organizations as intermediary actors. In this way, they represent different points of departure for cooperation and participation in the respective fields, and possibly different views on the development and implications of learning outcomes. In the empirical sections, we analyse this firstly by addressing the patterns of interactions in the course of developing learning outcomes and divisions of labour between higher education institutions and labour market organizations within different fields. We then look at how organizations evaluate the legitimacy of learning outcomes, and finally how they see learning outcomes reflecting the content of the professions.

#### ***Participation and maturity of organizational fields***

The reference group to the NQF in Norway, which in itself was an example of the tripartite collaboration between higher education institutions, the labour market and governmental representatives, advised that the local development and implementation of learning outcomes should include labour market actors as a means to embed learning outcomes in the relevant organizational fields. Although we find that most organizations took part in discussions about learning outcomes in their field in some way or another, the degree and purpose of their involvement varied depending on pre-existing links and arenas for interaction. Also, while involvement on study programme level was predominantly ad hoc, involvement on national arenas was more formal, suggesting that the introduction of learning outcomes did not change the common view that the content of study programmes belongs to the internal life of higher education institutions.

Both union confederations had taken part in the national reference group to the NQF organized by the Ministry of education, due to their established role in the Norwegian tripartite collaboration. While neither of them had any direct links to HEIs, they both emphasized their close ties to their member organizations “*that are in the field*” (I15),

implying that their input on national level was founded on the local expertise of their member organizations as professional organizations. However, professional organizations involvement 'in the field', here analysed as participation in the development of learning outcomes on study programme level, were less institutionalized than presented by the umbrella organizations. The larger part had not been formally involved in development of learning outcomes on study programme level, and those being involved had mainly been so in an ad hoc manner. Typically, they explained that they had been included in informal discussions on learning outcomes in connection with having other ongoing projects with the higher education institutions.

Professional organizations in mature fields, including those in health, technology and education, put more emphasis on their participation on the professional councils under The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR). Formally, the councils are established by higher education institutions to coordinate education and research between the higher education institutions in the particular disciplines/professions, but they are also arenas where organizations are invited to interact with relevant study programmes at a national level. Here, organizations can communicate the needs of the field of practice to higher education institutions and engage in mutual exchange of information. The councils had facilitated the coordination of learning outcomes in the various study programmes, but the final formulation of the learning outcomes had taken place in the higher education institutions. The exception was study programmes with a national curriculum, where special committees were established to develop shared learning outcomes. In these, members of the professional organizations were included to contribute with their perspectives.

Organizations with weaker links to higher education did not take part on these arenas to discuss learning outcomes. For instance, the organization in the field of arts, design and architecture explained that the relevant professional council had coordinated the development of learning outcomes in the field, but that they had not been involved in this process:

“Well, we weren't even aware that it was in process. It would have been exciting to be included and it would have been useful too” (I9).

What about the hybrid organizations? Arguably, these organizations had most to gain from the introduction of learning outcomes, as their members come from broad, disciplinary programmes with an apparently weaker relevance to the labour market. Taking part in the development of learning outcomes could be a way to negotiate the relevance of these

educational programmes to the labour market. Still, only one of the hybrids, representing professionals in health and welfare, had sought such influence. They had asked for a seat at the table in the development of learning outcomes in a national curriculum framework for health professionals, yet the request was declined. This was a case where friction had arisen as to which organization was the legitimate representative of the health profession - that is whether it should be the professional organization or whether hybrid organizations who organize broader spectres of professionals should be involved. In this case, the HEI had preferred cooperation with the professional organization over a broad involvement of both organizations, thus reconfirming existing ties rather than using the window of opportunity to restructure the patterns of interaction in the field.

The overall picture suggests that few higher education institutions followed the request in the NQF by systematically inviting organizations to take part in the development of learning outcomes at the local level. Instead, existing arenas and ties at the national level were activated and these were mainly used to include organizations in the development of learning outcomes in national curriculum frameworks. This suggests that the introduction of learning outcomes did not result in new linkages and field structuration, despite the hypothesized importance of learning outcomes as a tool to link labour market actors and higher education institutions closer together.

### ***Divisions of labour in professional fields***

Taking into account that learning outcomes should in principle describe the core expertise of a profession, we expected that professional organizations would take an interest in influencing their content, regardless of access to professional councils and committees. However, we found that a number of organizations were skeptical of such an influence. We observed this along three dimensions, which were all rooted in a view of the organizations as external actors in relation to higher education institutions, and that there was a clear division of labour between them in the field. Firstly, the notion of autonomous higher education institutions with self-governing educational programmes led some to argue that educational content was the main responsibility of higher education: “*It is not we as an organization that shall decide the subjects*”, one summarized (I6). Secondly, and in close relation to the first point, some added that their area of responsibility was professionals who had completed their education, not students: “*We work with members on the labour market. HEI work on the content of the education, and then we answer when they ask something*”, a representative of health professionals (I7) explained. Finally, some referred to the epistemic asymmetry among

scholars and external stakeholders in relation to the cognitive content of the education. Developing learning outcomes is according to this view a matter for designated experts within higher education institutions and is thus outside the expertise of external stakeholders such as professional organizations: “*We can voice an opinion about cooperation between higher education institutions and local communities and so on, but there it stops because we have nothing substantial to say about the subjects*”, a representative of a hybrid organization for social science and humanities explained (I13). Seen together, these actors argued that higher education institutions and professional organizations had different tasks, responsibilities and areas of expertise, and the introduction of LOs did not alter this view.

Organizations in mature fields who also took part on national councils emphasized on the other hand that their participation contributed to increase the relevance of the profession, and to prepare the profession for the future. Contrary to our assumption that learning outcomes primarily represented a window of opportunity for organizations in less mature fields to discuss the relevance of education, it was the professional organizations with existing strong links to higher education institutions that seized the introduction of learning outcomes as an opportunity to discuss the relevance of educational programmes in their field. A similar pattern was also found in the way organizations assessed the legitimacy of learning outcomes as a means to strengthen relevance differently.

### ***Legitimacy of learning outcomes***

To examine the legitimacy of learning outcomes, the respondents reflected on six statements regarding the relevance of learning outcomes for particular actor groups: for *students* to know about their own competence; for *academic staff* to organize their teaching activities; for *administration* to administer study programmes; for *employers* to know more about graduate competence; to satisfy the *publics’* need for accountability; and as a way to describe the core of that particular *profession*. These six statements represent both an internal and external dimension of LOs in higher education, showing various aspects of relevance and accountability. While it was clear that respondents had very different knowledge of the process, the statements made represent normative assessments regarding legitimacy of LO, and the kind of functions they are expected to have. Of particular relevance is the last dimension, their potential function to describe the core of the profession.

While it has been emphasized that learning outcomes can be a means to demonstrate relevance to the labour market, our respondents more frequently highlighted the internal

dimensions of learning outcomes, as a means for students to better understand their own learning process. At the same time, this was presented as a normative statement and doubts were raised whether this was in fact the case, as learning outcomes can be formulated as too abstract or unclear, and students can have rather instrumental approaches to own learning.

*“It is dependent on how precise it is. If it is on the level of the national framework. How useful will that really be? “in depth knowledge of the field” – this does not help a lot.” (I15)*

In a similar vein, the informant expressed concerns over the sole focus on outcomes at the expense of inputs:

*“It is good that there is a focus on the competencies, but it is also not good if its only that. It is important that you have done 200 injections as a nurse or have read this and that book in English literature.” (I15)*

There was also wide agreement of learning outcomes being a relevant tool for academic staff, also with some moderation in terms of the actual expected change processes. Contrary to some arguments claiming the transition to learning outcome to be rather administrative, the respondents did not generally view it from an administrative perspective. While several respondents naturally expressed their lack of knowledge with the internal procedures of higher education institutions, learning outcomes were not viewed as a tool for the administration to hold higher education accountable.

Regarding the dimensions external to higher education institutions, the respondents discussed the relevance of learning outcomes to labour market, the state and the profession. Here, some patterns emerged. Our starting assumption was that learning outcomes would likely be most relevant to those fields with traditionally weaker linkages to the labour market. The picture that emerged was more complex and showed a number of field specific characteristics that stemmed from the status of the profession. The linkages were to some extent re-emphasized in mature professional fields, but at the same time, it was highlighted that learning outcomes were less important to define the competence of the candidate as this was largely taken for granted by employers.

*“It should be of relevance, but I am not so certain whether it is. I believe that employers assume they know what this profession is and what we get when we hire this person” (I4).*

At the same, this notion appears to be dependent on the status of professional renewal and the extent to which the organization was actively engaged in boundary work at that time. For professions that had a clear need to define their core knowledge and relationship to other professions, learning outcomes were a means to outline their jurisdiction vis a vis other professions, being indicative of some scope of strategic view. This was particularly evident with professions in fields where external events such as technological progress or managerial forces challenged established division of labour.

While we assumed that learning outcomes would be welcomed in fields that did not have a clear professional profile to exemplify their relevance, in the interviews learning outcomes would less often be viewed as such. As one representative of a hybrid organization noted:

*“This was how it was presented, but whether it is like this in practice... Maybe in the professions. (...) For those working in public administration, (...) it is more about the level of education and less so about the discipline, unless you need a lawyer or an economist. Very few positions would specifically look for a sociologist” (I13).*

Instead, those organizations who represented social science and humanities disciplines outlined higher education as a specific institutional sphere with high levels of autonomy which should in fact be maintained and protected, sometimes almost on ideological grounds: *“We don’t need more detailed learning outcomes to increase relevance. This is a matter of respecting the knowledge within academia” (I12).* As such, concerns over the relevance of social science and humanities educations was not a salient issue for these organizations.

Contrary to the literature on higher education that sometimes views learning outcomes as an instrument for indirect government control, this view was not very evident in the views of professional associations. Some of the explanation for this observation can be found in that a number of our respondents claimed not to know the system well enough. Yet this view was also explained through the acknowledgement that despite learning outcomes being linked to quality assurance mechanisms, the state had actually few opportunities to intervene or control how learning outcomes are in fact being used within the institutions.

### ***Learning outcomes and the professions***

Given that learning outcomes describe the knowledge, skills and competence of a candidate who is expected to join the world of work, some respondents also reflected on the changes taking place in the profession. While it was acknowledged that these changes were reflected



in the discussions of learning outcomes, for instance in discussions over new framework plans, it was at the same time a cautionary perspective on learning outcomes enabling this or causing this. When asked whether learning outcomes described the content of the profession, most would agree with this notion, but with some moderation:

*“I think it does, but whether it is understandable, I don’t know.” (I4)*

*“In many ways, it is. But it is also complicated... this is learning outcomes. I think we need a wider description than what emerges in these, but they are a part of describing it.” (I3)*

Furthermore, this was moderated by the notion that a number of these organizations had not been involved in HEI processes on learning outcomes. For some, the two even represented two distinct aspects:

*“It describes the education. The profession is something different. The descriptions are fragmented, and there is something about the totality - beyond knowledge, skills and competencies. Something that used to be more complete is now cut up. So, one can get very caught up in these individual points and lose the bigger picture. Education is what you learn, profession is what you engage after some time in the field, after some reflection. During education, you are evaluated so much that there is no time for this.” (I8)*

A prominent argument and perhaps even fear regarding the introduction of learning outcomes is that they would lead to more standardization of the content of education, leading to more equal study programmes across higher education institutions with fewer local variations. One could also argue that increased standardization within the field can lead to a more coherent understanding of the core of the profession, by reducing potentially competing norms and ways of doing things. However, two distinct, but interrelated interpretations of standardization emerged – one regarding the standardization of the knowledge domain as formulated in learning outcomes, the other regarding quality standards. These two are of course related, as a too narrow or broad focus of study programmes also can be seen to be a concern of failing to ensure introduction into that respective field of knowledge. While a few respondents valued local differences in the implementation of learning outcomes, other expressed rather positive views on standardizations. They called for more standardization, both due to concerns for quality but also as a means to tackle the societal demands on the profession and expected that learning outcomes could promote such standardization. The latter was particularly evident for

typical welfare professions in mature fields, arguing that inter alia a nurse is a nurse, independently of where the candidate has graduated.

One can argue that this standardization concerns the formulation of learning outcomes, but one can also view standardization as a characteristic of organizational responses. While we assumed that there would be some isomorphism in terms of how these organizations approached the issue of learning outcomes, earlier overview in this article has shown that this has not been the case, with a range of idiosyncratic practices emerging.

### **Buffers or advocates? Discussing the involvement in work with learning outcomes**

A starting point for this article was to examine whether learning outcomes have facilitated new or tighter linkages between higher education institutions and professional organisations. In the analytical framework, we suggested two possible competing arguments: that it would be linked to the maturity of the fields; or that it could provide a window of opportunity to foster new links as professional organisations themselves interact with other professional organisations and in this manner adopt similar approaches. We also expected that both of these would be dependent on learning outcomes to be viewed as legitimate arenas for discussing professional knowledge.

While a typical view of learning outcomes would emphasize their role in communicating the content of candidates' knowledge to the labour market, the data shows that this view is rather modestly shared among professional organizations and organizational interests in the selected organizational fields. While some would report on engagement with learning outcomes in their work with national framework plans and report on processes of change, it seemed that learning outcomes were in such instances strategically used to further particular already existing change processes or just one among many concurrent changes. What was clear was that these debates were dependent on sufficient infrastructure in the professional field – that is, to have specific arenas and meeting places – such as the professional councils (UHR).

**Table 2: Identified links and patterns of interaction to HEIs and the role of learning outcomes in shifting these links**

Type of organization	Degree of closure on labor market	Expected links/patterns of interaction with HEI	Identified links/patterns of interactions with HEI	Role of LO
Professional organizations	High	Strong/established	Established links with HEI, sometimes also non-formalized and through multiple ties/arenas	Reinforcing existing ties
	Medium/Low	Strong/established	Mixed, some organisations highly involved, some with limited involvement	Occasional participation
Hybrid organizations	Medium/Low	Expected to strengthen due to LO	Weak link	Passive
Union confederations	Umbrellas for both licenced and non-licenced professions	Weak	Established links with policy actors, incl. the state	Participation on an overarching level during introduction

With few exceptions, learning outcomes are from the outside viewed primarily as instruments that are geared towards internal life of higher education institutions. This does not imply that learning outcomes actually have these kinds of internal functions, but that their function is normatively placed within the sphere of higher education. Perhaps more importantly, the study shows that this kind of work is still quite often on the margins of what professional organizations as well as hybrid organizations do. Despite our initial conception of these organizations as intermediary organizations situated between the labour market, the state and higher education, our findings suggest that the linkages between organizations and higher education still varies pending on the status of the organizations and the professional field. Thus, it was rather evident that learning outcomes on their own had neither created new kinds of linkages and structuration nor introduced contestation in the field. Instead, they largely re-emphasized existing differences in the patterns of professional organizations being either advocates or buffers between the labour market and higher education.

The study gives little support to the expectation that the introduction of learning outcomes would stimulate the relevance of higher education through the activation of intermediary actors in the field. This also has consequences for who has the jurisdiction to determine the core knowledge in the professional field. While learning outcomes were perceived as legitimate arenas to describe educational content, the lack of participation could suggest that

learning outcomes are not viewed as instances where the definition of the profession is at stake. At the same time, given that learning outcomes have the potential to formalise and summarise core knowledge that was sometimes implicit and taken for granted, this disconnect can also have significant consequences in the long run. This raises new questions about the relevant sites for determining the core knowledge of the professions.

The study shows that interaction patterns are heterogeneous and dependent on the specifics of the professional field, nature of the professional organizations, and at times even on individual actors. It shows that the specific rationales for why professional organizations engage with learning outcomes matter, and that the motivation to engage in learning outcomes varies generally. There is varied knowledge about learning outcomes, perhaps also indicative in the number of declined interviews where the stated reason was lack of engagement with learning outcomes. Instead of finding similarity in terms of the approaches to learning outcomes by organizations with similar functions due to the institutionalization of tripartite cooperation, we found divergence and path-dependencies, where learning outcomes can further sediment the unequal positioning various professional organisations have in their respective professional fields.

## References

- Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions : an essay on the division of expert labor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Allais, S. (2014). *Selling Out Education: National Qualifications Frameworks and the Neglect of Knowledge*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers
- Bleiklie, I., Frølich, N., Sweetman, R., & Henkel, M. (2017). Academic institutions, ambiguity and learning outcomes as management tools. *European journal of education*(1).
- Bohlinger, S. (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work, 32*(4), 393-406. doi:10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413
- Caspersen, J., Frølich, N., Karlsen, H., & Aamodt, P. O. (2014). Learning outcomes across disciplines and professions: measurement and interpretation. *Quality in Higher Education, 20*(2), 195-215. doi:10.1080/13538322.2014.904587
- Caspersen, J., Frølich, N., & Muller, J. (2017). Higher education learning outcomes – ambiguity and change in higher education. *European journal of education*(1).
- Christensen, T. (2005). The Norwegian state transformed? *West European Politics, 28*(4), 721-739. doi:10.1080/01402380500216641
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *Higher Education systems: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cort, P. (2010). Stating the obvious: the European qualifications framework is not a neutral evidence-based policy tool. *European Educational Research Journal, 9*(3), 304-316. doi:10.2304/eerj.2010.9.3.304
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited. Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 48*, 147-160.

- Dobbins, K., Brooks, S., Scott, J. J. A., Rawlinson, M., & Norman, R. I. (2014). Understanding and enacting learning outcomes: the academic's perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-19. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.966668
- Elken, M. (2015). New EU instruments for education: vertical, horizontal and internal tensions in the European Qualifications Framework *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 11(1), 69-83.
- Elken, M. (2016). 'EU-on-demand': developing national qualifications frameworks in a multi-level context. *European Educational Research Journal*. doi:10.1177/1474904116642778
- Entwistle, N. (2005). Learning outcomes and ways of thinking across contrasting disciplines and settings in higher education. *The Curriculum Journal*, 16(1), 67-82. doi:10.1080/0958517042000336818
- Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism : the third logic*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Greenwood, R., Raynard, M., Kodeih, F., Micelotta, E. R., & Lounsbury, M. (2011). Institutional Complexity and Organizational Responses. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 317-371.
- Greenwood, R., Suddaby, R., & Hinings, C. R. (2002). Theorizing Change: The Role of Professional Associations in the Transformation of Institutionalized Fields. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 45(1), 58-80. doi:10.2307/3069285
- Havnes, A., & Prøitz, T. S. (2016). Why use learning outcomes in higher education? Exploring the grounds for academic resistance and reclaiming the value of unexpected learning. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 28(3), 205-223. doi:10.1007/s11092-016-9243-z
- Hussey, T., & Smith, P. (2002). The Trouble with Learning Outcomes. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3(3), 220-233. doi:10.1177/1469787402003003003
- Knight, P. T., & Yorke, M. (2003). Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(1), 3-16. doi:10.1080/1356251032000052294
- Larson, M. S. (1977). *The rise of professionalism : a sociological analysis*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.
- Michelsen, S., Vabø, A., Kvilhaugsvik, H., & Kvam, E. (2017). Higher Education Learning Outcomes and their Ambiguous Relationship to Disciplines and Professions. *European journal of education*, 52(1), 56-67. doi:10.1111/ejed.12199
- Muzio, D., Brock, D. M., & Suddaby, R. (2013). Professions and institutional change: Towards an institutionalist sociology of the professions. *Journal of management studies*, 50(5), 699-721.
- Nerland, M., & Karseth, B. (2015). The knowledge work of professional associations: approaches to standardisation and forms of legitimisation. *Journal of Education and Work*, 28(1), 1-23. doi:10.1080/13639080.2013.802833
- NKR. (2011). Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring (NKR) In. Oslo: Kunnskapsdepartementet.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2011). Remaking professionals? How associations and professional education connect professionalism and organizations. *Current Sociology*, 59(4), 465-488. doi:10.1177/0011392111402716
- Olson, J. R., Afdal, H. W., & Elken, M. (2018). Multiple Institutional Logics in National Curricula: The Introduction of Learning Outcomes in Teacher Education and Engineering Education in Norway. In P. Maassen, M. Nerland, & L. Yates (Eds.), *Reconfiguring Knowledge in Higher Education*: Springer.
- Prøitz, T. S., Havnes, A., Briggs, M., & Scott, I. (2017). Learning outcomes in professional contexts in higher education. *European journal of education*, 52(1), 31-43. doi:10.1111/ejed.12207
- Reay, T., & Hinings, C. R. (2009). Managing the Rivalry of Competing Institutional Logics. *Organization Studies*, 30(6), 629-652. doi:10.1177/0170840609104803

- Sin, C. (2014). Lost in translation: the meaning of learning outcomes across national and institutional policy contexts. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(10), 1823-1837. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.806463
- Smeby, J. C. (2008). Profesjon og utdanning. In A. Molander & J. C. Terum (Eds.), *Profesjonsstudier* (pp. 87-102). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Suddaby, R., Cooper, D. J., & Greenwood, R. (2007). Transnational regulation of professional services: Governance dynamics of field level organizational change. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 32(4-5), 333-362. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.aos.2006.08.002
- Sweetman, R. (2017). HELOs and student centred learning – where's the link? *European journal of education*, 52(1), 44-55. doi:10.1111/ejed.12202
- Sweetman, R. (2019). Exploring the enactment of learning outcomes in higher education: Contested interpretations and practices through policy nets, knots, and tangles. . In *Series of PhD dissertations*. Oslo: University of Oslo. .
- Sweetman, R., Hovdhaugen, E., & Karlsen, H. (2014). Learning outcomes across disciplinary divides and contrasting national higher education traditions. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 20(3), 179-192. doi:10.1080/13583883.2014.902096
- Whitley, R. (2008). Universities as strategic actors: Limitations and variations. In L. Engwall & D. Weaire (Eds.), *The university in the market* (pp. 23-37). London: Portland Press Ltd.
- Young, M., & Allais, S. (2011). Qualifications in context: thinking about "the shift to learning outcomes" in educational reform. In S. Bohlinger & G. Münchhausen (Eds.), *Recognition and validation of Prior Learning* (pp. 209-230). Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann Verlag.