In Search of Quality:
Evaluating the Impact of Learning Outcomes Policies in Higher Education Regulation

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

This study presents evidence on the impact of learning outcomes policies in quality enhancement and accountability in higher education regulation. The purpose of this research was to determine how learning outcomes policies are being used in regulatory schemes, and what (if any) impact the policies have had. In order to answer these two questions the research employed and then triangulated findings from a survey, case study analyses, and meta-evaluation research methods.

Seventy-four regulatory agencies participated in a global survey, providing insight on the policy trends in articulating, incorporating and measuring learning outcomes. A primary aim of the survey was to identify policy evaluations that had taken place. While few policy evaluations were reported, the survey findings show a substantial difference in the impressions of impact and the research findings on impact. Nine policy evaluations uncovered through the global survey were analysed and coded as cases studies. The case studies determine positive, neutral or negative implications of the policies, and also provide qualitative insight into operational challenges leading to policy success or failures. The coded case studies were then pooled into a
meta-evaluation to uncover the relative impact of policies. When analysed in a meta-evaluation, the results of existing research show learning outcomes policies are having limited impact.

When triangulated, findings from the three research methods confirm the limited impact of learning outcomes policies and also reveal possible reasons for failures. One explanation is that the policies are poorly designed (being misaligned, misapplied, or misdirected), and that rectifying the policy issues will produce positive change. Another reason is that the way the regulatory agencies operate is a hindrance to policy success: that their roles, goals, and spheres of power are incongruent with the desired impact of learning outcomes.

The most significant finding from this study is the critical role of policy evaluation in higher education regulation in order to provide summative information on impact. In both the microcosm of learning outcomes cycles of ‘articulate, incorporate, measure’, and the macrocosm of the ‘formulate, implement, evaluate’ policy cycle, the value of closing the loop through evaluation is critical for success.
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Chapter 1
Introduction and research design

1.1 Introduction and context

The late 20th century saw significant changes to higher education worldwide. The massification of higher education produced a diverse profile of institutions, programs and students unlike the small elite systems of previous times. These changes to higher education provision have created a complex and global ‘market’ demanding new forms of governance, accountability, and signalling mechanisms. Significant efforts have been made to clarify this ‘market’: to demonstrate to national and international stakeholders, including governments, the public, institutions, and students, how institutions are providing quality education and contributing to society.

Globally, higher education systems are actively developing and implementing learning outcomes initiatives in accountability and quality assurance frameworks in order to demonstrate, or ‘prove’, the value of higher education and learning in meaningful ways (Shavelson, 2010). For example, American, Australian, Canadian, and European quality assurance and accountability frameworks have introduced aspects of learning outcomes into their models1.

Recently, and considered by some to be a paradigm shift (Tremblay, Lalancette, & Roseveare, 2012), there has been a focus on learning outcomes as a means to understand, demonstrate and assess educational quality. Defined learning outcomes are clear statements of what a learner knows and can do by the end of an educational program (Wagenaar, 2013: 73). Along with appropriate assessment measures they can provide a transparent means to understand student learning.

Clear expectations and indications of teaching and learning quality are perceived to be beneficial in a number of ways. They can support a clear understanding of educational value to students, employers, and the public at-large. They can also enhance institutional and programmatic

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1 For examples see New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (2012); Council of Ontario Universities (2010), the Australian Government (2013), and the European Higher Education Area (nd).
improvement in coordination, curriculum development and teaching practices. Furthermore, they can provide measures of what has been considered intangible in the world of quality assurance and accountability – educational quality. They can also provide a transparency of programming which allows for greater international and comparative understanding. By revealing student learning achievements (commonly a discreet activity between a student and a faculty member) it may be possible to gain a picture of teaching and learning, and ultimately the quality of education provided. Hence, learning outcomes are believed to have the potential to demystify the processes and outcomes of education to the benefit of the student, program, institution, and wider public and international community.

With these expectations, the number of learning outcomes policy and research initiatives has swelled in the past decade. Institutions, governments, quality assurance agencies, and international organisations are just a few bodies that have been developing policies on learning outcomes with the expectation that they can be used to further policy agendas. Yet despite years of work in the area, there is very little information on if, and how, policies are having an impact on educational quality.

1.2 Rationale for this study

The ‘Hype Cycle’ is a business term that describes the uptake of innovations; describing how new technologies (or ideas) are typically met with inflated expectations of application followed by a period of disillusionment when they do not preform as expected, before there is a measured acceptance of appropriate applicability (Gartner, 2016). The past 10 years of learning outcomes activities epitomise the ‘peak of high expectations’, where there have been a number of success stories and a few stories of failure. However, for the most part, they have been just that – ‘stories’.

While there have been some investigations on the effect of learning outcomes on student success (Hattie, 2009b), the impact of national qualifications frameworks (Allais, Raffe, Strathdee, Wheelahan, & Young, 2009; Allais, 2010), and more broadly examining the impact of quality assurance activities (Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007), there have been few evaluations
of how learning outcomes initiatives are explicitly contributing to system-level quality through regulatory mechanisms.

Furthermore, the previous research on learning outcomes policies has been sparse and ad hoc, tending to examine the formative process issues of organisation, their implementation and the uptake or surveying for stakeholder feedback. While process evaluations are legitimate evaluation tools (Vartiainen, 2004) there have been few summative evaluations – outcomes evaluations – analysing the impact of learning outcomes initiatives on system-level quality understanding.

This has created a gap in both literature and policy understanding, of how impactful learning outcomes have been in supporting educational improvement, coordination, transparency or any other intended goals. Given the considerable attention, political and financial support devoted to competency-based education and learning outcomes the question of ‘impact’ is critical.

Regulatory bodies (such as quality assurance, accreditation agencies, or government agencies with accountability agreements) are the primary ‘guards’ of educational quality in many countries, and it is assumed they are the major drivers of widespread educational quality improvement and system design change. They hold the responsibility to ensure students are receiving quality education and that the institutions are operating to expected standards. For this reason, this study seeks to understand if, and how, learning outcomes policies are improving higher education quality through accountability, accreditation and quality assurance schemes.

Blackmur (2010: 67) claims that too much quality assurance research is “anodyne, descriptive, and devoid of theoretical sophistication”. Thus, the intention of this research is to determine if the claims about learning outcomes are founded, and what the actual effects have been: “In the era of knowledge explosion and heightened accountability to the public, it has become imperative that…practice be based on research findings that give direction…for the most effective interventions” (Saldelowski, 1997, in Paterson, 2001:4). Stensaker and Harvey, similarly, call for research on learning outcomes for the purposes of quality and accountability (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011a).
Hence, the importance of summative information on the impact of learning outcomes initiatives cannot be overestimated. Just as it is important to demonstrate the achievement of student success in gaining competencies through measurement, it is necessary to ascertain the success of learning outcome initiatives in system level quality through evaluation.

Therefore, in order to properly assess and understand whether or not learning outcomes are having their intended impacts on quality (determined through regulation activities) this research will determine if summative evaluations have taken place, consider the value of the results, and only then look to extrapolate information on the possible ‘value’ of learning outcomes. Results from this research will present evidence-based considerations on the possible impact of learning outcomes and their value in higher education quality assurance.

The present chapter intends to briefly introduce readers to the basic concepts underpinning this research. It also lays out the research methodology, design and methods in order to lead readers through the overall structure of the study. Finally it considers how the choices made in the research methods highlight both assumptions made by the researcher as well as limitations of the research process.

### 1.3 Research methodology

As an initial foray into the topic of summative impact of learning outcomes policies, this research will triangulate information from three different data collection techniques: a survey, case studies, and a meta-evaluation. A global survey will collect information on the status of learning outcomes activities, and will specifically identify agencies that have conducted policy evaluations. The research performed by, or on behalf of, regulatory agencies, will then be analysed as case studies to uncover structural features of the regulatory environment and policy choices, such as goals, activities, outcomes and impact. Finally, the findings of research cases will be pooled in a meta-evaluation to examine trends to present summative information on the ‘impact’ of learning outcomes policies. The conclusions of this study will present evidence on the value of learning outcomes policies in quality enhancement and accountability in higher education regulation.
1.4 Research questions

This study has two main research questions:

1. How are learning outcomes policies being used in higher education regulation?
2. Are the policies working?

Within these two broad questions lie more explicit lines of inquiry. Specifically:

- What are the stated goals of incorporating learning outcomes into regulatory frameworks?
- Are the goals, purpose, activities, actors, targets and strategy type aligned to support the achievement of goals?
- At what stage are they focused? Articulation? Implementation? Measurement?
- Are there differences in the policies and activities of different regulatory types?
- What has been the impact of learning outcomes policies?
- Are existing learning outcomes policies, frameworks, and expectations appropriate for on-the-ground activities?

1.5 Research design and methods

Three research techniques are used in this study. A survey, case studies and meta-evaluation each collect information on policy activities and outcomes. The findings of each are then triangulated to present evidence-based considerations on the impact of learning outcomes and the value in higher education quality assurance.

Given the limited evidence of evaluations, surveying relevant stakeholders is a reasonable method to identify relevant research. Surveying relevant stakeholders also presents the opportunity to ask questions to identify current trends in learning outcomes policies activities and provides interesting insights into the maturity of learning outcomes initiatives in regulatory activities. It is an effective method to answer the first question of ‘how are learning outcomes being used?’ and also provides some information on impact.
The second phase of research is a systematic review process followed by the third phase that is a meta-evaluation of research on learning outcomes policies. These two research methods are chosen for a number of reasons but primarily because, when combined, they provide a summary of research and findings on a specific topic with the purpose of identifying past research studies and direct future investigations, and can empirically integrate results of the previous studies in order to answer the question of impact. They minimize error and bias in research synthesis and enhance the validity of inferences drawn from a body of research. Systematic reviews and meta-analysis research can make a significant contribution to the knowledge base of a field, and for that reason are commonly used by doctoral students and scholars (Littell, Corcoran, & Pillai, 2008).

Hence, research that is identified in the survey is then systematically analysed as case studies in order to provide qualitative information on specific policies. The results of the research cases are also coded for use in the meta-evaluation. Within the meta-evaluation, the coded results of the research cases are pooled to extract the findings of existing evaluations in a meta-evaluation. The following sections outline the details of each of the research methods.

1.5.1 Survey

A survey is a research instrument that gathers information from participants in a way that is inexpensive, quick, and easy to analyse. The intention of the survey is to gather as much information as possible with the explicit goal of identifying agencies that have conducted research on their learning outcomes initiatives.

1.5.1.2 Participants

The survey design sought a sample of bodies responsible for higher education regulation worldwide. In order to identify relevant organisations two agencies that are international hubs of regulation agencies were identified: the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Quality Group (CIQG).
INQAAHE is the global largest network of quality assurance organisations. Established in 1991, it is a member-based organisation with the mission “to create, collect and disseminate information on current and developing theory and practice in the assessment, improvement and maintenance of quality in higher education” (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, 2010) The organisation hosts conferences, publishes a journal, provides commentary on topical issues, (such as quality assurance in cross-border higher education), and offer guidelines for best practices quality assurance. As of January 2015 there were 19 quality network members (such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Asia Pacific Quality Network) and 260 ‘Full’ or ‘Associate’ or member agencies (such as the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities and the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities)².

The CHEA International Quality Group is a relatively new organisation developed as an arm of the US-based Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Developed in 2012, CIQG intended to promote and facilitate dialogue around the globe to improve quality assurance in higher education the agency brings together institutions, regulatory agencies, businesses and government together to share information on their quality standards, identify trends in quality assurance, and promote international cooperation in improving academic quality in higher education. As of January 2015 CIQG had 129 members³.

Both INQAAHE and CIQG post their membership information on their public websites. INQAAHE provides compiled lists of their member organisations, along with a contact name and email or a generic contact email. CIQG’s membership list includes organisational websites, but did not include contact email⁴. For other CIQG members, each website was visited and reviewed in order to determine the most appropriate individual – i.e., Director of Policy and Research or President, or a generic ‘info’ email. In some cases the websites did not provide any

² There are also ‘Affiliate’ members who are individuals. Affiliate members are not included as participants because they do not have regulatory powers).
³ A membership in the CIQG is automatic for CHEA members, and others may join. CHEA has approximately 3,000 members (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2012) however, this group was not contacted as it was felt that would skew the data by making representative of USA only.
⁴ Like INQAAHE, CIQG also had individuals as members. As they would be unlikely to have regulatory policies or powers, 15 individuals were removed from the contact list.
contact information but instead had online forms or telephone numbers. Following numerous attempts at contact, email addresses were not available for 14 organisations. Therefore of the 129 possible CIQG members only 100 were included in the survey population. 49 agencies were cross-listed when INQAAHE (N=279) and CIQG (N=100) lists were referenced for duplication. This brought the total survey population to 330.

The presidents of both agencies were contacted via email in January/February 2015 informing them of the research and alerting them that their members were going to be contacted. They were invited to ask questions of the research or examine the survey. Because the membership lists are public information formal approval from INQAAHE or CIQG was not requested. The INQAAHE Secretariat responded with an email of support and interest in the findings.

1.5.1.2 Survey tool

The survey was developed with four main areas: The first section deals with the structure and function of organizations, the second requests information on learning outcomes policies and framework documents, the third inquires about implementation issues, and the final section inquires about evaluations have conducted on policies and activities. To prioritize internal validity of the instrument, definitions and meanings of terms were provided in the survey. See Appendix A for the survey tool.

International experts (identified through their knowledge of survey methods, quality assurance and/or learning outcomes) reviewed a draft of the survey to ensure its appropriateness for different cultures. Ten individuals provided feedback on the survey. They had a range of backgrounds including geographical and technical expertise in the area of learning outcomes, quality assurance, or survey design more generally. See Appendix B for a list of experts consulted.

The survey contained a total of 49 questions; however, participants were unlikely to answer every question. Some questions in the survey were used as disqualifiers in order to ensure the right type of participants were targeted, and that the questions were appropriate for them. For example, agencies that did not have policies for learning outcomes were excluded from further questions as the line of inquiry would be irrelevant to their situation. Furthermore, in order to
probe deeper into some issues, if a participant indicated they were involved in certain activity (assessment, for example) survey skip logic was applied to asked more detailed questions before returning them to the main survey. Appendix C provides the skip logic of the survey.

**1.5.1.3 Data collection**

A total of 330 organisations were sent an invitation to participate the survey electronically via Survey Monkey, a commercial survey provider. An introductory email briefly invited individuals to review a letter of invitation to participate in the study and provided a link to the online site. The letter indicated that someone with familiarity with the quality assurance process and research activities should fill in the survey.

As per Canadian Tri-Council Ethical Research protocol, the letter of invitation informed individuals of the purpose of the study, the amount of time it would take, the potential benefits of participation and associated risks. See Appendix D for the ethical protocol approval, Appendix E for the email invitation and Appendix F for the letter of invitation. Participants were required to consent before entering the survey. Upon completion, survey participants that indicated they had evaluated their learning outcome policy were asked if they could be contacted for follow up information.

The original invitation was sent on Wednesday, February 10, 2015, a follow up email send Monday February 16, and a final reminder sent on Thursday February 19, indicated the survey would close on February 20, 2015 at midnight EST.

A total of 73 responses were collected through Survey Monkey. One individual emailed asking to have the survey administered over the telephone. The information gleaned from this individual during a 30-minute phone call was manually imported into the data file. The total number of participants was 74.

**1.5.1.4 Data analysis**

The Survey Monkey data was exported into a Microsoft Excel file for cleaning and analysis. The data was analysed using simple descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, Chi-
square goodness of fit, etc. Cross-tabulations were performed on some data for deeper investigation into trends.

1.5.2 Case studies

Those survey participants that indicated there was research conducted were emailed directly for further information and a request to share the research documentation. Each research study is individually examined presented to provide a brief overview of the regulatory environment, the policy purpose and activities, and the research findings. Each case study is analysed in two ways:

1. Through the structural features of: regulatory model, focus, and level of expectation (as set out in Chapters 2 and 4).
2. Through the policy choices of: the identified goals, actors, audiences and strategy types (as set out in Chapter 2)

The purpose of the case studies is to gain better understanding of the context in which the policies were developed, the goals and activities in place, and the subsequent finding on impact. It provides a detailed examination of the research on learning outcomes policy that is necessary to understand if the policies are successful in achieving goals and under what conditions. For example, perhaps focusing on measurements through accreditation processes is effective at achieving labour market alignment, but audits focusing on implementation are unsuccessful at improving credit transfer. A more nuanced understanding of the overall environment wherein the policies exist is important in order to tease out trends and best practice.

Of the organisations that participated in the survey, four indicated that they had conducted policy evaluations and were able to provide them for analysis for the dissertation research. Two of the organisations, the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Latvia’s Foundation Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (AIKNC) provided research reports, and the Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA) from Chile provided an overview of the research through personal email correspondence. Each of the organisations was invited to review the case study of their agency, AIKNC and CINDA provided feedback.
In ‘snowball’ manner, some survey participants shared documentation they felt would be relevant to the research. This uncovered projects by the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA). NOQA has representation from QAA’s in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Sweden. The agency is not a member of the INQAAHE or CIQG, yet it fits the parameters of a higher education regulatory network/agency. Because a primary intention of the survey was to uncover research, the discovery of the NOQA research (which includes case studies from Norway, Finland\(^5\), Sweden and Denmark) is included as part of the data for evaluation. Because the research was uncovered outside of the survey and the research was public the NOQA agencies were not contacted for feedback.

1.5.3 Meta-evaluation

A meta-evaluation is a process by which findings from existing evaluations are pooled (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Here, the meta-evaluation is applied to the case study findings in order to distil common patterns of impact based on the type of implications (positive, neutral/undetermined or negative). The results are presented using descriptive statistics. With a small population of cases using inferential statistics to extrapolate correlations or causality is generally unwise. However, where it was occasionally possible and appropriate to run an analysis on the data, the results are presented and discussed in order to provide additional insight.

1.6 Assumptions and limitations of the study

As in any study there are concepts, expectations and beliefs that underpin the research and may influence the results. In this case, known pre-existing issues can be found in: conceptual issues, scope, data limitations, position of the researcher, and the broad constraints of social policy research. Any errors in this research attributed to these or other factors are entirely and exclusively the fault of the researcher.

\(^5\) FINHEEC, one of the Finish quality assurance agencies, is an INQAAHE member but did not participate in the survey.
A common criticism of system-level learning outcomes is that they promote hegemony and standardisation of higher education. These issues are discussed substantially in Chapter 2, however it is not the focus of this research. The importance of critiquing the actual choice of goals of the policies and the conceptual implications for higher education is recognised and considered valuable. However, this research focuses on the more practical policy and program issues of what is occurring and considering the success in achieving stated goals, rather than judging or critiquing the goal choices.

This work assumes regulatory bodies are the lynch-pins in the emergence of established expectations and indicators of educational quality, hence it will not focus on individual institution, program, or classroom level learning outcome activities. There are significant activities in these realms that have considerable bottom-up impact on system and international activities. These direct interventions are critical to supporting student learning, but are not currently organised in a way that is scalable to systems or the international domain. Thus, they do not currently support high-level understanding of system level initiatives supporting higher education policy, quality assurance and accountability. These local initiatives deserve attention and evaluation, as they may indeed prove more impactful than system level or international regulatory initiatives. However, they are not the focus of analysis in this study.

Within the data, there are issues of reliability and validity because it was obtained from a random sample of self-selected organisations. It is possible there is bias of respondents, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation is the position of the researcher. Conducting international comparative work is a challenge as there may be factors that are misunderstood or poorly conceptualised by the researcher. As the researcher has significant familiarity with one system (Ontario), it is possible that attributes or assumptions may be placed on other jurisdictional activities that are misguided. The language capacities of the researcher may have also be a hindrance. The survey was only available in English. Therefore, it is possible that some organisations did not participate based on language barriers. Unfortunately, financial constraints made this are unavoidable.
Impact analysis of social policy is a complicated endeavour as it is difficult to isolate cause and effect relationships in ‘wicked’ problems, as there are a variety of factors and different policy levers in play. This is particularly true in learning outcomes initiatives, as there is rarely a clear baseline of well-established indicators (Allais, 2010). Hence, any claims on impact must be cautious.

Finally, Zemsky wonders if it is possible to create broad-level solutions given the complexity of higher education systems (2011). Thus, this research is approached with a fair warning: “Woe to the would be reformer who would talk too broadly and comprehensively about costs or outcomes of learning: though such integrating conversations will be needed...” (Zemsky, 2011, p. 171), and any insights from this research will be tentative at best.

1.7 Significance of research

Conceptually, learning outcomes make sense: identify what students are expected to know or be able to do, ensure that is what they are being taught, and then assess them to see how much they have learned. But information on the actual contribution of learning outcomes policies is missing from both the literature and policy conversation. Without accurate information on the value of learning outcomes policies, or areas of promise or problems, the conversations in the field will remain conceptual. Hence, this research takes the practical approach of examining the issue of learning outcomes as a policy problem, the results of which will produce tangible evidence and support real-world action.

1.8 Organization of chapters

The thesis is organised into 8 chapters. Chapter 2 outlines primary concepts in the learning outcomes literature: how learning outcomes came about, the broad goals, instrumental purposes, and initiatives in place. Chapter 3 provides context for learning outcomes in contemporary higher education, reviewing issues of the globalised world as the stage for massive higher education systems with multiple responsibilities. Chapter 4 brings forth challenges associated with regulating increasingly complicated systems and problematizes the issue of identifying ‘quality’ in higher education. It further considers existing policy research on learning outcomes and
establishes need for summative research on the outcomes and impacts. Chapter 5 provides data analysis and commentary on the findings of the global survey, and Chapter 6 analyses existing research by presenting case studies coded for use in the meta-evaluation. Chapter 7 conducts a meta-evaluation and presents evidence on the impact of learning outcomes policies. Finally, Chapter 8 triangulates the findings from Chapters 5, 6 and 7, provides commentary on the implications of the results and presents ideas for future research on the regulatory use of learning outcomes.
Chapter 2
Concepts of learning outcomes

This chapter sets out core concepts associated with learning outcomes. It identifies the educational shift that has brought student-centred learning to the forefront and demonstrates how it is being formalised through policies, procedures and innovative activities. As a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry, the use and intention of terms is still being solidified and currently varies by scholar, institutional type, geographical and policy spheres. Hence, Section 2.2 reviews the terminology and definitions associated with the concepts of competency-based education and learning outcomes, and provides a working definition in order to present a baseline for the research. Section 2.3 presents a taxonomy of activities that lie within the realm of learning outcomes: the broad goals, actors, instrumental purposes and strategies in place. This review highlights key activities and demonstrates the varied intentions and expectations of what learning outcomes can achieve. The final section offers practical and theoretical concerns and considerations sparked by the introduction of learning outcomes, which serves as a reminder of the importance of critical evaluation of the goals, and the intended and unintended consequences of learning outcomes policies.

2.1 Shift to competency-based education

Competency-based education is a conceptual framework/paradigm towards education that puts student learning at its core. It sees education as a process to provide students with demonstrable knowledge, skills and abilities. It represents a shift away from understanding and regulating education as a structural framework of inputs and outputs such as length of program and course material (Adam, 2001), and instead allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery.

The notion of competency-based education can be traced back to the time of Plato (Mulder, Gulikers, Biemans, & Wesselink, 2009), and has been an explicit component of vocational and professional education (such as nursing and medicine) and adult education since the 1960s (Jessup, 1991; Klein-Collins, 2012).

The introduction of competencies came both from large-scale initiatives and from the grassroots level, in individual programs and institutions. For example, in the 1970s Alverno College in the
United States was a pioneer in outcomes-based higher education by developing curriculum that required all students to demonstrate core abilities (competencies) in the context of their studies across various disciplines (Abromeit, 2013; Bogue & Hall, 2003).

Scotland was an early adopter of system-wide competency-based education in vocational training, which introduced vocational qualifications in the mid-1980s (Raffe, 2003), and later New Zealand was the first to introduce qualifications expectations across all levels of higher education in 1991 (Strathdee, 2010; Young, 2003).

Over the past 15 years, the philosophy has gone beyond independent programs and boutique institutions: it is increasingly part of all programming including arts, science and humanities (Buhrman, 2011), is being incorporated into traditional higher education institutions (Klein-Collins, 2012) and is established as part of national higher education systems (Allais, 2010; Wagenaar, 2013; Wheelahan, 2009).

The implementation of competency-based education systems or programming can be extreme or incremental (Klein-Collins, 2012). In the most extreme application of competency-based education, entire undergraduate degrees are provided to students who demonstrate mastery of the requirements at their own pace and through a variety of means. Western Governors University in the US is an example of an institution that takes a comprehensive competency-based approach to higher education that is not confined by traditional structural boundaries such as time, place, or space.6

The European Union is a prime example of how a meta-system and 47 national systems shifted to competency-based higher education in approximately 10 years. The parallel forces of the European Commission’s 1999 Bologna Declaration (aimed to create an integrated European Higher Education Area), and the 2002 Lisbon strategy (focusing on the modernization of higher education) revamped higher education across the continent (Dona dalle Rose, Luigi F. & Haug, 2013). These processes have had a number of goals and activities (for details see Adelman, 2009; Lennon, 2010a; Wagenaar, 2013), but two elements are key to the present discussion:

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6 see [www.wgu.com](http://www.wgu.com)
• Establishing a common system of degree comparison through qualifications frameworks
• Establishing shared understanding and expectations of curriculum and performance criteria at the discipline level

Through these two activities, national systems (formerly based on credit hours and a myriad of structural designs) moved to a system that incorporated student work-load hours and student learning outcomes, which dramatically changed the framework of how higher education delivery and administration was conceptualized (Mitchel, Trotter, Wilson, & Walmsley, 2013).

A less reformist way of moving towards competency-based education is to simply establish, or tack on, learning expectations to existing structures and curriculum (Klein-Collins, 2012) as is occurring in Canadian quality assurance regimes and institutions (Lennon, 2014a). In this case, it is assumed that the learning outcomes are already present, but they become more central when articulated and identified.

Hence, competency-based education is a conceptual framework that sees education as a process to provide students with demonstrable knowledge, skills and abilities established through stated expectations. In this, established learning outcomes can “shift the power away from educational institutions and towards other stakeholders” (Allais, 2010: 25). The articulation and measurement of expectations allows for the shift to occur: when the quality of education is assured through authentic means, structural confinements of time, place and space are no longer as relevant (Soares, 2012), and ‘managing’ higher education quality requires different means. In referring to national statements of qualifications, Young (2003: 225) notes the “extremely radical and far-reaching implications” of education frameworks based on outcomes.

2.2 Competencies and learning outcomes

The move to competency-based education is functionalised through the clear articulation of expectations of student learning. Though simple in concept, this is laden with verbiage that includes competencies, competence, learning outcomes, expectations, capacities, attributes, descriptors, standards, and more that are often entwined and can be conflicting (Allais, 2010; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2008; Sadler, 2013). For example,
the South African Qualifications Authority states “outcomes are the qualities…that are expected at the end of a process of learning. The meaning of outcomes is similar to the concept of competence” (South Africa Qualifications Authority, 2004: 6). Sadler, on the other hand, posits that competences are the broad “envelope term” that is made up of skills and competencies (2013: 13).

For clarity in this thesis, however, there are two types of expectations commonly employed: ‘competencies’ and ‘learning outcomes’. Competencies are broad cumulative statements “of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process” (European Commission, 2006: 16). Very often they are categories of integrated skills, knowledge and abilities, which group sets of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that underlie performance (Weinert, 2001). Commonly, four to eight competencies are established for a sector of education be it for K-12, lifelong, college-level diplomas, undergraduate, masters or doctoral degrees. For example, the Ontario Qualifications Framework and the Ontario Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations include: depth and breadth of knowledge; knowledge of methodologies, research and scholarship; application of knowledge, communications skills, awareness of the limits of knowledge, autonomy and professional capacity (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, nd; Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2010).

Learning outcomes, on the other hand, are “clearly defined and measurable statements of learning that reflect the scope and depth of performance; what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning” (Lennon et al., 2014: 47). In the most technical sense, learning outcomes are action-oriented measurable knowledge, skills and abilities that form the basis of the competencies. The literature often uses the terms graduate capacities or attributes interchangeably with learning outcomes with the same intent.

The term ‘learning objective’ is also used in place of learning outcomes or competencies (Johnstone & Nodine, 2014). Though Teichler and Shomburg (2013) assert that the term ‘learning objectives’ is used more commonly and for the same purpose as learning outcomes, it is also argued that outcomes are distinct from learning objectives in that the former are short
term and explicit to the content, where the latter deals with long-term ‘above content’ acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities (University of Toronto, 2014).

Using an example from Ontario we can see how each of these three types of learning outcomes are employed in the area of communication in an honours undergraduate degree program (see Table 2.1 below). The first column is an example of a competency taken from the provincial qualifications framework. This is the only statement on the expectation of communication skills at the undergraduate level. The second column provides an example of a learning outcome focused specifically on writing skills from the Ontario Tuning project (Lennon et al., 2014). It is one of six learning outcomes in the area of communication. The final example is of a learning objective from an engineering course syllabus (Lennon et al., 2014). That learning objective is linked to specific assignments where content is discussed, other learning outcomes are addressed and a grading rubric is provided. We can see that, while similar, there is a sliding scale of specificity and ability to concretely assess students.

Table 2.1: Examples of expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Learning outcome</th>
<th>Learning objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ability to communicate information, arguments and analysis accurately and reliably, orally and in writing, to specialist and non-specialist audiences using structured and coherent arguments, and, where appropriate, informed by key concepts and techniques of the discipline.</td>
<td>Write concise, accurate and grammatically correct materials that draw on scholarly sources, appropriate for audience needs.</td>
<td>Effectively communicate in a written document following a prescribed format and using standard grammar and mechanics. Students are graded on English mechanics and report formatting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 It is nearly identical to that of the provincial quality assurance agency for universities that states “The ability to communicate accurately and reliably, orally and in writing to a range of audiences” (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2010: 2).
8 Other learning outcomes under communication include: reading comprehension, listening comprehension, presentation skills, discussion skills and graphical communication.
Refraining from a lengthy debate on the semantic use of terms\textsuperscript{9}, the ultimate purpose is to translate a course of study into a set of understandable, measurable elements. Canadian audiences use ‘learning outcomes’ as the generic term (FitzGibbon, 2014; Norrie & Lennon, 2013), and in this study the term ‘expectations’ is used as a generic term encompassing both competencies and learning outcomes.

Beyond the two types of expectations, the focus and level of learning outcomes also vary (see Table 2.2 below). The focus of learning outcomes can be targeted at credential levels, such as diploma, undergraduate or graduate degrees; they can be sector-\textsuperscript{10}, discipline-, or program-specific; or they can articulate generic skills that underlie all programming such as problem solving, critical thinking and communication.

Table 2.2: Type, focus and level of expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of expectation</th>
<th>Focus of expectation</th>
<th>Level of expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>Credential</td>
<td>International/regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning outcome</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>National/jurisdictional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning objective</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Student (in course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generic skills</td>
<td>Student (across courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: By going across the type, focus and level, the cells of each row can be mapped to every cell in the other rows allowing for over one hundred possible types of expectations.

Miller and Leskes (2005) note that learning outcomes assessments can occur at various levels. Regardless of the assessment component, when adopting this notion of ‘levels’, learning outcomes can be set at international or regional levels to reflect commonalities; made explicit for a nation or jurisdiction in order to reflect norms; fixed for an institution in order to reflect priorities; utilised in programs to highlight purpose; or attached to a student either during one course or across many to indicate achievements.

\textsuperscript{9} For a review of the historical development of the language of learning outcomes see European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2008).

\textsuperscript{10} Sectors are groupings of academic disciplines, i.e., social sciences, humanities, life and health sciences, etc. (Lennon et al., 2014, Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, 2014).
2.3 Taxonomy of learning outcomes initiatives

Drawing on literature from the field of program and policy evaluation, the introduction of learning outcomes policies can be viewed as a “formulated response to a problem” (Inwood, 2004: 207) with intended goals, short-term and long-term impacts (purposes) and associated activities/strategies to achieve them (Patton, 1998; Rossi et al., 2004). The goals can differ depending on the rationales established by the policy actor or stakeholder developing the initiative, and differ depending on the target population(s).

Table 2.3 below offers a simple way to consider the variety of actors involved, goals, target population and activities. The following section describes the goals, actors and target audiences in order to present the range of intentions, as well as the strategy types\textsuperscript{11}. Note that within this proposed taxonomy the elements are not mutually exclusive and can often span across many columns and rows. However, the initiatives often focus on one or two elements.

Table 2.3: Taxonomy of learning outcomes initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common goals</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
<th>Strategy type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning</td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Public/employers</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional improvement/quality</td>
<td>Discipline associations</td>
<td>Faculty (course design)</td>
<td>Measurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System design</td>
<td>Quality assurance agencies/ accreditation bodies</td>
<td>Program (curriculum development)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour market alignment and economic development</td>
<td>National governments</td>
<td>Institution (accountability)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International coordination (and comparison)</td>
<td>International/regional government or non-governmental organisations</td>
<td>System level (coordination and accountability)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{11} The purposes of initiatives (i.e., the short and mid-term outcomes) are extremely important elements and could be part of this taxonomy. However, they are tightly aligned with other elements, have hundreds of specific outputs and are therefore too numerous to include.
2.3.1 Goals

When defined, learning outcomes support a clear understanding of educational outcomes to students, employers and the public at large. They create a transparency of what occurs in classrooms into identifiable capacities for students. Learning outcomes remove the ‘black box’ of education by clarifying exactly what skills will be gained (Hattie, 2009a). For students, they provide information about educational pathways by describing the key elements of a program or credential, which enhances the ability to make sound educational decisions (Banta & Blaich, 2010). Telling potential students what skills they will achieve upon graduation allows them to make informed choices about their educational options. Bouder (2003; in Young, 2003) suggests that established learning outcomes can be instruments of communication, providing students with a map of various credential options and where they may lead.

Articulated learning outcomes are also argued to be useful in teaching and learning (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Banta & Blaich, 2010; Hattie, 2009a; Hattie, 2009b). A meta-analysis by Hattie (2009b) demonstrated that clear learning objectives were tightly correlated to student success. While the research focused on objectives rather than outcomes, the notion remains the same: students perform better when they understand what it is they are trying to achieve. Furthermore, when assessed on specific outcomes, students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, there is clarity of focus when faculty members know what skills, capacities and abilities they are trying to engender in their students. This leads to improved instruction and assessments that are more closely aligned with supporting and capturing the skills of students (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Embedding common expectations of learning outcomes is also believed to foster institutional and programmatic improvement in coordination and curriculum development. In the incremental approach, defined expectations of program/credential outcomes can be mapped to curriculum to determine when and how students are being provided with the educational experience needed to gain the skill. Assessments of student learning outcomes can also highlight how students are performing and support program improvements. In the more extreme model, when learning outcomes are used to reform curriculum, entire programs can be designed to lead students through developing and mastering attributes (Johnstone & Nodine, 2014).
Learning outcomes can also support system level coordination. In many cases language used in sectors differs – be it colleges or universities, or between sectors and disciplines – where a range of terms are used to describe similar concepts or, alternatively, the same word can be used for different purposes. Simply finding common language to articulate student capacities, and then identifying the level of mastery expected in each credential, enhances understanding of the intentions of the sectors and helps to find precisely where the similarities and differences lie (Lennon et al., 2014; Lokhoff et al., 2010).

When learning outcomes are mapped and embedded it allows for improved coordination in student progression, credit transfer and articulation agreements (Allais, 2010). This is possible because learning outcomes more readily “translate the aims of a course or programme of study into a set of competencies” making it easier to give credit for learning acquired in another institution, removing barriers to student mobility, and supporting lifelong learning (Roberts, 2008: 4). When established, learning outcomes provide confidence that the student has achieved certain expectations, thus lowering the need for blind trust in other educational providers. Similarly, it helps to protect students from rogue providers in increasingly complex systems (Middlehurst, 2011).

Transparent learning outcomes also support employability. When students are knowledgeable about their capacities, they can recognise the applicability and transferability of their credential to a variety of employment options and also possess the language to describe their skills (European Commission, 2014). Learning outcomes support employers in their hiring processes, as they can consider the types of skills they require an employee to possess and identify the corresponding credential or program (Allais, 2010). This is particularly valuable given the variety of educational credentials available; what Allais refers to as the “jungle of qualifications” (2010: 49).

This transparency can then be used to inform both education and the labour market about mismatches. There is considerable discussion about a disconnection between the abilities of students and the needs of employers (see, for example Allen & de Weert, 2007; Lennon, 2010b; Miner, 2010). Whether these concerns are founded or not (Handel, 2003), and whether or not one believes that it is the role of education to prepare students for the labour market, articulating the
abilities graduates do have is a way to begin conversations to identify gaps in expectations (Roberts, 2008).

When learning outcomes are established it is also possible to internationally coordinate and compare educational programming (Lokhoff et al., 2010; Wagenaar, 2013). It is particularly useful in cases where the system design of credential offerings, nomenclature, length and institutional types differ. Coordination, either through restructuring (as in the case of the EU), or in identifying compatibility (as in the case of Canada), supports the integration and coordination of national systems in order to “improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society” (European Commission, 2008: 11).

Hence, the literature suggests that learning outcomes demystify the processes and outcomes of education to the benefit of the student, program, institution, national governments and international community. The logical end to this is that it will both improve educational quality and support national economies. Clarifying what is expected of graduates, ensuring programs provide the opportunities to gain the skills, and then measuring and demonstrating success – of both students and programs – is expected to significantly impact education systems and nations (Allais, 2007; Allais et al., 2009; Allais, 2010; Young, 2007).

2.3.2 Actors and targets

Working towards the overarching goals, learning outcomes initiatives also have short-term outcomes or outputs: targeted purposes. As the purposes are similar to the goals it would be redundant to reiterate them here. Instead, it is more useful to illustrate how different actors are engaging with learning outcomes, and what target ‘populations’ they seek to impact. The term population/target audience is used to indicate the specific point at which the policy/initiative intends to exert change. Not intended to provide an environmental scan, the following section instead highlights different ways learning outcomes are being utilized.

Learning outcomes can be developed independently within a single program or institution. The targets of initiatives at this level are towards improving student learning, to support faculty in designing course curriculum in order to satisfy specific learning outcomes, and to support
programs in designing programmatic curriculum to ensure that all intended learning outcomes are provided to students throughout the program. At this level, Benjamin (2013b) argues that faculty must be central to the process for the expectations and associated assessments to be seen as valid and reliable.

Discipline associations can develop learning outcomes. For example, disciplines have been developing learning outcomes in Europe through ‘Tuning’ projects that bring academics together from across the continent in order to establish common expectations (Lokhoff et al., 2010). The target populations of these initiatives are the programs – to ensure consistency in the program expectations – in order to articulate norms in the field as well as to facilitate student transfer agreements (Lennon & Frank, 2014). In the case of professional programs (such as engineering, medicine and business) they establish common expectations of professional capacities, which ease credential recognition and acceptance in labour market mobility.

Quality assurance and accreditation bodies are also engaged in learning outcomes initiatives. Though discussed in much greater detail in later sections, for the purpose of identifying actors and target audiences here, quality assurance agencies establish learning outcomes in order to support both institutional accountability and improvement. In this case, the intention is to ensure institutions are providing students with agreed upon programming and providing information on the ‘quality’ of education. This information is used for both benchmarking and approval as well as for program improvements. The target of quality assurance is at the institutional and program level rather than at the student level, but can also be used for national and international cooperation and comparison.

Accreditation agencies operate in a similar fashion to quality assurance agencies, but some professional accreditation associations’ focus on student-level achievements (Bogue & Hall, 2003). For example, expectations established by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada set out seven competencies with associated learning outcomes that all professionals must master (Frank & Danoff, 2007). This is slightly different than business or engineering accreditations, which focus on the program as the target of evaluation (Lennon & Frank, 2014).

Government involvement in learning outcomes has a myriad of purposes. Asserting credential expectations through credential profiles (such as the Canadian Degree Qualifications
Framework), governments are setting the standards for educational provision; providing transparency; minimizing barriers to progression; and maximizing access, flexibility and portability (Young, 2003). Statements of expectations through system-level frameworks, for example, are important tools “to signal to the labour market the skills and competencies held by graduates” (Santiago, 2008: 261). The principal goal of a national framework is to “achieve a better match between educational provision and the needs of the labour market” (Young, 2007: 253).

Non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies (regional or international) are also involved in learning outcomes work, primarily for the purposes of coordination and comparison. For example, the European Union aimed to “integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society” (European Commission, 2012: 11). The focus of this type of activity is on coordination, as learning outcomes can be used as a means to both list and regulate credentials in a region (Allais, 2010).

Similarly, the Organisation of Economic Coordination and Development (OECD) aimed to develop a common assessment of learning outcomes internationally. The primary target audience of the initiative was the institution and program, aiming to provide comparative information for quality improvements, but it also sought to support international coordination and provide students and employers with transparent information (Tremblay et al., 2012).

### 2.3.3 Strategies

Learning outcomes are only statements of expectations (Rauhvargers, 2009). They must be embedded into regulation and quality assurance regimes, institutional organisations, programming and curriculum design for there to be any impact. Importantly, they must also be assessed to ensure the expectations are being met and the learning goals are being achieved (Young, 2007). Otherwise learning outcomes are words that express desires rather than providing real information about student capacities, program effectiveness, institutional management or system success.
Higher education learning outcomes initiatives can therefore be grouped into the three primary areas of work:

i) **Articulation**: Processes of developing learning outcome statements

ii) **Incorporation**: Processes of integrating learning outcomes into systems, institutions, programs, course curriculum, etc.

iii) **Measurement**: Processes of assessing student achievement of learning outcomes

The first step of articulating learning outcomes is well advanced. Coming to agreement on expectations is not particularly difficult (Blömeke, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Kuhn, & Fege, 2013; Lennon et al., 2014), but can be a lengthy process. Accuracy and clarity are very important in this articulation stage as uptake can be hindered if there is definitional confusion (European Commission, 2012). While expectations can be established at any number of ‘levels’ (student, program, institution, etc. as set out in Table 2.2) and can be a top-down (bureaucratic) or bottom up (faculty) exercise, there are a there a few primary way that it occurs.

At the national level, many western jurisdictions have detailed expectations across levels of education and around the world many are in the process of doing so (Africa and China, for example) (Wangenge-Ouma & Langa, 2011; Xia & Zhong, 2014). These qualifications frameworks tend to be established by government organisations as part of system design and accountability agreements. Europe, for example, has the European Qualifications Framework, which is the basis for national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), and there is a Canadian Qualifications Framework that is adopted or adapted by the provinces and territories (Lennon, 2014a).

Another way learning outcomes are being established is through ‘Tuning’ projects. Initiated in Europe in the early 2000s, ‘Tuning’ is a bottom-up process of establishing discipline or subject area learning outcomes in collaboration with faculty members, students and employers (Wagenaar, 2013). Tuning has had wide international uptake: 19 Latin American countries, seven US states, Australia, Russia, Africa and Ontario have all undertaken Tuning projects. Each jurisdiction has adapted the framework to suit its own purposes, but the fundamental notion of...
academics and experts collaborating on suitable learning outcomes that compliment and support the existing, or developing, qualifications frameworks is widespread (Norrie & Lennon, 2013).

Many institutions are independently developing learning outcomes that are unique to their institutions (sometimes as part of a regulatory process). In the US, for example, a survey of provosts revealed that three-quarters have assumed common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students and further research revealed that 80% of all programs and departments had established intended learning outcomes (Kinzie, 2010; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009).

Once established, incorporating learning outcomes into internal and external quality assurance regimes, into institutions, programs and curriculum, can be a significant task. In some cases, learning outcomes are superficially added into quality assurance frameworks, and there is no expectation that institutions or programs must demonstrate that the learning outcomes are integrated (Lennon et al., 2014). In other cases learning outcomes are used as drivers of change, and are incorporated into educational systems and institutions (Allais et al., 2009). The Bologna process is a prime example of such an activity.

An example is seen in how nations introduce and monitor the implementation of qualifications frameworks. Young (2007), for example, considers implementation to be the crux of success in introducing expectations into national policies. In South Africa, following the dissolution of apartheid, the two existing higher education systems needed to be harmonised, and the introduction of common expectations in institutions aimed to ensure that all students had access to the same educational quality. Allais (2007) finds that this goal was not successfully achieved and identifies implementation issues as the primary hindrance. Notable challenges in implementation spurred the European Commission to establish a 10-step guide for its member countries to follow when introducing a qualifications framework (European Commission, 2012).

Incorporating learning outcomes into a program requires curriculum mapping to ensure students are provided with the opportunity to engage with each of the learning outcomes. This mapping, though simple in concept, proves to be a challenge for many institutions, and there have been a number of models of best practice put forth. For example, the Ontario Tuning project presents a detailed implementation plan for an institution from top to bottom (Lennon et al., 2014), and
Lennon and Frank (2014) describe how learning outcomes can be incorporated into a specific program and course curriculum.

The measurement of learning outcomes is perhaps the most critical aspect of the policy initiatives. Unless it is possible to determine that a student has actually achieved the expectations, the existence of statements or curriculum redesign does not actually indicate success or help to demonstrate educational quality. There are three primary ways in which students learning can be evaluated:

i) in the classroom

ii) large-scale assessments

iii) demonstration of achievement

Assessment activities in the classroom are by far the most common activity in learning outcomes initiatives. Authentic, embedded assessments are argued to be the most promising learning outcomes assessment mechanisms (Banta, Griffin, Flateby, & Kahn, 2009; Miller & Leskes, 2005) as they are directly related to the educational program, support formative learning and are aligned with realistic disciplinary activities. Embedded assessments are also a way to assess student learning outcomes that are not amenable to testing through standardized measurement techniques (such as team work).

In the knowledge-based economy where concrete knowledge becomes rapidly obsolete, skills, critical thinking and competence are the crucial factor for success. These elements, which are not always explicit in singular course design, are imperative for the success of future generations. Gallavara et al., for example, note that

Since grading has previously dwelt largely on acquisition and ability to use knowledge on a given subject, the introduction of learning outcomes can potentially mark a fundamental shift in the assessment of students. Learning outcomes enable institutions to assess students also in terms of generic competences and skills, such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking and so on. There is little doubt about the relevance of the abilities to working life and the importance of being able to measure them (2008: 45)
An important aspect of assessing individual students in courses is determining appropriate and transparent means to judge the work/activity relative to the achievement of a learning outcome. Assessment rubrics, for example, provide a means to assess the quality of authentic student work relative to stated outcomes in a transparent manner. Other activities supporting authentic evaluations include collaborating on question banks so that shared assignments and assessments can be used to compare student achievement through authentic, embedded means.

Another direct measure of student learning outcomes can be found in standardized performance tests. Standardized assessments make learning outcomes achievement comparable in a way that is more transparent than embedded assessments. They provide a snapshot of achievement abilities and provide useful information about individual students across courses, and also provide program and institutional data for comparative assessment. Many nations/jurisdictions employ some form of large-scale assessment, some of which are a component of graduation requirements (Ewell, 2009; Kuhn & Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2011; Lennon, 2010a).

Prominent examples of direct tests include Council for Aid to Education’s Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the international Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) feasibility study of the OECD. The CLA is a standardized test used to evaluate the generic skills, competencies and abilities of students (Benjamin, 2013b). It is also used to assess the “value-add” of education, by accounting for several external factors, such as socioeconomic status or prior educational attainment, as both may impact performance but are not a reflection of an institution’s impact (Lennon, 2014b). The AHELO study developed common expectations and assessed student performance at the end of a bachelor’s degree in 17 countries around the world in three different knowledge areas to determine if a global assessment is possible and valuable (Tremblay et al., 2012).

The third area that is garnering much interest is in demonstrating achievement of learning outcomes in a meaningful way; essentially translating education into understandable components through badges (Goodrich, 2011), e-portfolios (Chambers & Wickersham, 2007), or competency

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12 See https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics for examples.
transcripts (Fain, 2013). These provide a means to demonstrate mastery through cumulative learning outcome identifiers.

Badges and e-portfolios are useful ways for students to signal their abilities to employers after graduation. A badge can indicate successful achievement of a learning outcome by indicating mastery of a skill. Portfolios can be used as a means for formative assessment, to provide examples of achievement of learning outcomes through course work, or can be assessed as part of a capstone course or assignment for summative assessment, with completion recorded on a transcript. Both of these activities are also useful ways for “attainment of the acquisition of skills such as collaboration, teamwork, leadership and other 21st century skills” which are not easily identifiable in traditional transcripts (Goodrich, 2011).

Since 2005, European countries have provided students with a Diploma Supplement that functions as a recognition instrument to indicate to employers, institutions, the general public and the individual, the content of the qualification and the structure of the system from which it came (Europe Unit, 2006). Beyond a simple transcript, the Diploma Supplement addresses ‘Information on the Contents and Results Gained’ broken down into four categories: knowledge and understanding, intellectual (thinking) skills, practical skills (subject-specific) and key skills. These activities, though simple in concept, can highlight student abilities and help translate academic achievements into a format that employers can understand. While they are not necessarily direct measures of success, they are indications of achievement.

To summarise, the introduction of learning outcomes has occurred rapidly over the past 15 years. In a variety of settings, with various purposes, goals and audiences, a number of activities are aiming to establish and measure learning outcomes. At present, the landscape of activities is diverse, the strategies ad-hoc and, while not contradictory, not necessarily clearly aligned. Nonetheless, the rapid uptake and dedication of so many educational stakeholders suggests that learning outcomes are more than a passing educational fad, and rather a phenomenon that has the potential to make a significant contribution to higher education.

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2.4 Concerns and considerations

It is apparent that learning outcomes are many things to many people. In some respects, the expectations of learning outcomes are akin to expectations of a ‘silver bullet’ that will solve all the problems of modern day higher education systems\(^{14}\). There are, however, fundamental, ethical, concerns that learning outcomes are not beneficial to education, rather, that they are harmful\(^{15}\). Arguments fall into four primary areas: concerns with increased commodification of education; the resulting bureaucracy and infringement on institutional (or program or professorial) autonomy; the corresponding deprofessionalisation of teaching; and the potential of focusing on, or measuring, the wrong things.

“Learning outcomes, literally, stand for educational product” according to Brancaleone and O’Brien (2011: 513). They suggest that the notion of learning outcomes has firmly established education as a commodity. As a ‘commodity’, the ‘product’ is agreed upon by the seller and the buyer (i.e., the learning outcome is agreed to and understood by both the teacher and the student). Products on exchange also have value; because learning outcomes are by nature measurable, it is thus possible to identify the precise value of the product. When education is anointed with value judgements, and credentials equate status, it also forces issues of power dynamics. So where education has the potential to be the ‘great equalizer’ through access, the commodification of education through learning outcomes actually has a greater likelihood to promote capital accumulation rather than redistribution (Brancaleone & O’Brien, 2011) reinforcing inequality (Allais, 2007).

This in turn, creates a market of buyers and sellers that needs to be regulated. Qualifications frameworks, for example, structure that market (Wheelahan, 2009). The structuring requires bureaucracy and managerialism, as it removes some aspects of the teacher’s role from the individuals and places it in the hands of technical experts who have established the expectations and the criterion for judgment (Allais, 2007). While this is supposed to reduce the subjectivity of

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\(^{14}\) Significant changes have occurred in higher education in the past century. Chapter 3 provides a description of what has occurred and why, and discusses the impacts on higher education more broadly, but specific concerns about learning outcomes are addressed here.

\(^{15}\) Other arguments about learning outcomes exist, but are focused on specific policy activities and will be further discussed in Section 2.4 below.
evaluation, it fact it becomes even more subjective, as the increasing number of standards need large bureaucracies to govern the systems and make judgements on achievement. This changes educators into bureaucrats and decreases their autonomy in academic decision-making (Allais, 2007).

Fuerdi (2012) focuses his arguments on deprofessionalisation, noting four ‘compelling’ arguments of how learning outcomes deprive both teaching and learning of meaning. First, he notes the alteration to the relationship between student and teacher, which he argues should not be uni-directional, but a dialogue. That dialogue is also important to the teacher who is not merely imparting knowledge but is an academic who also seeks stimulation of questioning minds. He goes on to comment that rigidity of learning outcomes and the standardization of pedagogy inhibit the capacity to deal with uncertainty and exploration. His third argument speaks to the ‘art of teaching’ (which he believes has been devalued) and that with predetermined learning outcomes “academics are spared the hassle of having to think for themselves” (Furedi, 2012: 5). The final consequence of learning outcomes, he notes, is that it ‘breeds a culture of cynicism and irresponsibility’ (Furedi, 2012: 5). What he is speaking to is the deprofessionalisation of teaching and learning, and the consequences of a workforce that no longer feels agency in the workplace due to bureaucracy and lack of institutional trust.

The final challenge brought forward in the literature concerns the learning outcomes themselves. Learning outcomes are measurable statements. Does that mean that if something is not measurable it should not be part of education? Young (2009) suggests that this focus on measuring reduces education to all but the most routinized knowledge, whereas Brancaleone and O’Brien (2011) acknowledge that it is useful for capturing transferable skills but useless at capturing real education. What about other elements of education that are less tangible? Berlach suggests that in this situation, that which can be measured becomes more important and that which cannot becomes less valuable, and because learning outcomes are, by nature, measurable, he considers that “the death of knowledge occurs when evidence of learning becomes more important than the learning itself” (Berlach, 2004: 10).

Similarly, it can also be argued that learning outcomes subjugate knowledge that is outside of the mainstream or that is culturally different. In the interconnected and globalised world of policy sharing there is the possibility that there is a separation of knowledge creation from the society in
which it exists. This is most obviously captured in cross-border higher education systems where curriculum (and learning outcomes) created in one country is transplanted into another (Knight, 2008). In many cases there is considerable concern and attention given to ensure the ‘appropriateness’ of the programming, but nonetheless, it can be argued that there is an increasing homogenisation of education.

The arguments both for and against the introduction of learning outcomes policies and programs are compelling. There are significant rationales attached to the policies and reasonable concerns regarding the potential impact of their introduction into education. The arguments above highlight a fundamental opposition to current geopolitics and economic frameworks and challenge traditional understandings of the value and role of education.

Brancaleone and O’Brien (2011: 507) for example, note that “learning outcomes, through their bureaucratization and marketization, imply the adjustment of one’s social relations, mode of work/learning and hence, of consciousness, to an economic base”. Giroux (2014: 2) also notes that universities as places that produce commodities “represents the nightmare that neoliberalism defends”. In order to better understand how learning outcomes play a role in society, we turn now to a discussion of the modern higher education landscape.

### 2.5 Summary

This chapter provided a foundational review of current issues and activities related to learning outcomes. It served to provide the landscape of changes occurring within educational systems and how learning outcomes are being introduced at a number of different entrance points: in the system, in the classroom, when setting the curriculum and when examining student abilities. This chapter demonstrated how the web of activities that fall within the common discourse are actually quite diverse and seek to serve very distinct purposes. It also discussed the prevalence of activities, which suggests an inherent belief that there is an educational, organisational and social benefit to the articulation of expectations in student learning. The notion that learning achievements beyond content knowledge can be articulated and measured is still relatively new within education; however, the demand for this information is growing. The rapid growth in the field can be better understood when placed within the context of broader society and the
increased expectations put on formal higher education. These issues are explored in the next chapter.
Chapter 3
Contextual background and underpinnings

Higher education policy is not isolated from broader social, economic, and political influences. In fact, higher education is a reflection of its contemporary society in how it deals with issues of access and accessibility, funding, quality and accountability. The following chapter outlines some of the prevailing issues that have shaped the current higher education landscape in modern, western economies. The nature of globalisation and international connections is discussed as is the power and role of national governments. Prevailing neoliberal economic policies that shape knowledge-based economies are considered for their impact on the vertical and horizontal goals and structure of higher education. These changes have had a subsequent influence on the perception and expectation of post-secondary education, and are considered through a discussion on student and labour market mobility and rankings exercises. These elements trace to the rise of accountability, quality assurance and the subsequent demand for learning outcomes.

3.1 International environment

This research, and indeed the supposition of the need for learning outcomes, is firmly surrounded by the political economic theory of neoliberalism, as it has had profound effects on how higher education is conceptualised, administered and managed. The perspective of this research is on system-level and is also influenced by theoretical models emerging from international relations theories of globalisation, internationalisation, and cosmopolitanism.

It is commonly accepted that globalization has altered the political economy of nations around the world. Globalisation has been defined as “the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas…across borders” (Knight & De Wit, 1997: 6). The speed at which knowledge and information is transferred around the world has made the ‘interconnectedness’ of all forms of business, culture and education increasingly linked and also increasingly competitive (Held & McGrew., A. Goldblatt, D. and Perraton, J., 1999; Marginson, 2004). This economic and cultural cohesion supports a softening of physical and metaphorical borders and global markets. Secondary effects of globalisation are the “extended and intensified movement of people and the spread of common policy ideologies and notions of business practice”
(Trilokekar, Jones, & Shubert, 2009: 23). This does not mean, however, that the role of ‘state’ is obsolete.

Bull (1977) characterises internationalisation as activity (and commitment to activity) designed to promote the specified goals of the ‘society of states’, goals that he ranked in descending order of priority are: preserving commitment to the society of states itself, preserving the sovereignty and independence of individual states, and promoting peace. In the globalised world, the role of state as a regulatory body is critical. In the case of education, governments (i.e., province, state, country) are the primary actors in education policy worldwide (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987). Davis and Guppy argue that “The effects of globalisation on administrative structures in nation states have made education policy too important for educators and as a result education policy and framing occurs at a ‘higher level’” (1997: 459).

Most western societies have strong systems of accountability and quality assurance regimes that are able to influence higher education institutional activities either by direct or indirect levers. Furthermore, as most western economies are the primary funders of higher education (either directly or through indirect subsidizations), and are held responsible to their public to demonstrate value for dollar investment, identifying objective measures of educational achievement is critical to system management as well as creating strong national economies.

Because higher education firmly lies in the hands of national governments (in funding and governance) in most western economies, cosmopolitanism, a theory of cross-national alliance building (Held, 2004), nicely explains quality assurance activities. It helps to conceptualise the development of new networks of belonging that go beyond nation states (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000) where quality assurance and learning outcomes initiatives are supporting regionalisation and internationalisation through the development of higher education ‘areas’ with increased linkages and cohesion (Tremblay et al., 2012). Cosmopolitanism theory also aids an understanding of the international network of players involved in learning outcomes initiatives where it is often disciplines, professional associations, or institutions that are engaged in learning outcome initiatives.
These notions of globalisation, internationalisation and cosmopolitanism support the phenomenon of higher education learning outcomes initiatives. As noted, there are a number of actors involved in learning outcomes. They range from governments, to International Governmental Organisations (IGOs) (i.e., OECD) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), international and national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, to universities. These actors are working together and borrowing from each other, which is developing both transparent and common expectations of learning outcomes, ways to incorporate them into systems and frameworks, and ways in which they can be assessed.

With these broader international relations occurring at 30000 feet, the actual purpose, provision and monitoring of higher education on the ground has been most visibly impacted by neo-liberalism. Where traditional liberalism supports an economy free from any political intrusion or planning, neo-liberalism supports notions of strong guidance and oversight of an otherwise deregulated economy. In the case of higher education, where liberalism supports notions of professionalism and autonomy, soft managerialism and trust, and diffuses control, neoliberalism values hard-managerialism, competition and monitoring, outputs and performance indicators (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Rhodes (2005: 12) offers a succinct description of the neo-liberal influence on higher education: “By neo-liberal changes I mean both formal policies and underlying conceptions that in education involve reducing public sectors, decreasing public subsidies, increasing evaluation, monitoring and competition, and increasing tuition fees and privatisation”.

Situating post-secondary education in this complex international system, it is possible to identify common trends and issues while still respecting national authority and unique characteristics. Hence, while quality assurance and learning outcomes initiatives are embedded within a national system and its institutions, the phenomena also take place outside of national boundaries and there is significant influence and interaction between the spheres, which is transforming higher education worldwide by developing sets of norms.
3.2 Knowledge-based society

The late 20th century saw significant changes to higher education worldwide (Tremblay et al., 2012). The development of knowledge-based economies (or societies) based on human capital, requires higher education systems to have both depth and breadth. In the latter half of the 20th century higher education expanded to take on more students, develop diverse system designs, with different types of providers (such as private and distance). The development of higher education around the world has also become more interconnected and globalised, where students, faculty, programs and institutions move within and across national borders. This, in turn, has called into question how we know that ‘quality education’ is being provided to the diverse populations through various educational means and modes, and has demanded new ways of monitoring and demonstrating achievement.

In order to participate in a globalised world, nations are seeking to develop their ‘knowledge-base’. Where previous economic systems were based on natural resources or manufacturing, today, modern economies are based on knowledge transfer of social capital as well as scientific and technological progress (David & Foray, 2003).

Both the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) and World Bank have paid significant attention to issues of the knowledge-based economy in the past decades. The OECD suggests that a knowledge-based economy rests upon four ‘pillars’: innovation, new technologies, human capital and enterprise dynamics that work together to create a society. While the OECD was the first to suggest this in 1999, the World Bank was also developing a theory of the knowledge based economy, which has become much more substantial and defined (Robertson, 2007). In 2004 the World Bank created the Knowledge for Development (K4D) programme (World Bank, 2010). It has devised an extensive data tool for nations to comparatively measure performance in the areas deemed important to the knowledge-based economy. One of the four ‘pillars’ in which governments are investing is in an educated and skilled population that can create, share, and use knowledge well.

Engelbrecht (2003) argues that receptivity to knowledge and innovation is the most important aspect of a knowledge-based economy: He suggests “a nation must have a powerful social or
cultural capacity to absorb and interpret knowledge and information”. Recognising the value of an educated population, and seeking to compete internationally, strategies to improve ‘performance’ as a knowledge-based economies are being employed in both developed and developing nations.

### 3.2.1 Human capital

With the pressures of the knowledge-based economy and globalisation impacting upon nations around the world, Keeley argues that societies and governments are reacting in ways that “best safeguard the interests of their own people” (Keeley, 2007). To protect their people – their natural resources – governments are working to improve the knowledge skills and competencies that are essential for social progress and economic growth. An early, and influential, writer on the theory of human capital, Theodore Schultz, highlighted the importance of individuals as an important part of the wealth of a nation, and noted that “skills and knowledge...have economic value...and predominantly account for the productive superiority of the technologically advanced countries” (Schultz, 1971: 6).

While Schultz wrote of this new theory nearly 50 years ago, the perceived value of human capital is now firmly established in national strategies. In particular, his notation of ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ has become an essential part of the discussion on creating human capital for the knowledge-based economy. Today, the OECD defines human capital as “the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being” (Keeley, 2007: 29). While the terms have a variety of definitions attributed to them, definitions from the European Commission (2008: 11) are used here to illustrate common understandings:

- **Knowledge** means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories, and practices related to a field of work or study.
- **A skill** means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive, and creative thinking) or
practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools, and instruments).

- Competence means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills, and personal, social, and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations and in professional and personal development.

Understanding how these three features can support the development of a knowledgeable society and productive workforce helps to conceptualise how nations are aiming to support their human capacity. In order to develop a labour force that is able to react to the needs of an ever-shifting economy, the knowledge and skills mix of a population is increasingly important.

This means that formal education systems play a much greater role in sustaining the economy than in the past (Winche, 2003), and the higher education available to a population is critical in developing a suitably knowledgeable workforce and should be a central government priority (Benjamin, 2013a). The availability of university, college, vocational and apprenticeship programmes determines the future labour force, and provides graduates with skills, competencies and knowledge to become contributing citizens.

The knowledge and skills mix of the population is generally determined by the size and structure of the higher education system. Recognising the need for human capital, many nations around the world have moved towards ‘massifying’ their higher education systems. This shift towards education for labour market success is a key feature of the ‘mass’ higher education model (Trow, 2007), and what Neave refers to as a shift from the public virtue of education to a role that “is construed in terms of economic return, whether to the public or to the private individual” (2000: 17). In discussing the neoliberal influences on systems of PSE, Rhodes furthers the argument by suggesting that there is a shift towards valuing knowledge, and institutions, as the link to the economy that can “potentially generate revenue in the private and global market place” (2005: 15).

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16 Immigration is another method of altering the skills mix of a population.
3.3 Massification

Higher education was initially a privilege of the elite, servicing small numbers of students for the purposes of developing a ruling class. However, recognising that this model was insufficient to meet the needs of the new economies (Neave, 2000), post-secondary education has evolved to supply greater public demand with the expectation that it would prepare students for the labour market (Beerkens-Soo & Vossensteyn, 2009). Trow (1973) identified three models, or stages, of higher education provision: the ‘elite’ system (engaging less than 15% of the age group), the ‘mass’ system where 16-50% of the age group attend, and the ‘universal’ system where over half the age cohort attends postsecondary education. The ramifications of these different models are seen in who attends, the expectations on the system and ways in which it is governed both internally and externally (Trow, 2007).

The massification of higher education in North America and Western Europe\textsuperscript{17} was supported by notions of personal and national social and economic benefit from higher education. In order to provide postsecondary education there was a significant expansion of institutions and spaces for students. In many cases, this was simply a measure to expand access to students who had the ability and capital to attend a traditional institution but were restricted due to space limitations. Eventually, new students included ‘traditionally aged’ qualified students of more varied demographics, including those of lower socio-economic status and women. In more recent years, the move from mass to universal education has encouraged even more students to attend. In many nations this includes encouraging students that have been traditionally underrepresented such as minority groups, students with disabilities, rural and remote learners, amongst others with diverse educational needs.

Alongside this move to increase access to postsecondary education was a concurrent movement to increase recognised credentials. As there were more individuals with credentials being produced in universities and more information and training available in any number of subject areas there was an increased demand for individuals already in the workplace to have a

\textsuperscript{17} Massification occurs at different time for different systems. Neave (2000), for example, asserts that it occurred in the US following WWII, France in 1972, Germany in 1976 and the UK in the mid-1980s.
qualification to ensure that they were suitably knowledgeable about their area. This requirement of a recognised credential in some professions and the need to upgrade skills further enhanced the massification of postsecondary education by creating ‘adult learners’ (Lewis, 1992; Tait, 2008).

Over the past 50 years, occurring at different times for different systems, higher education systems have moved from the elite model (catering to a narrow part of the population), towards serving a large and diverse population with varied educational goals. Some OECD member countries have even reached ‘universal education’ where over half the age cohort has a post-secondary credential (Teichler & Bürger, 2008).

Neave (2000) suggests that massification has two stages. The first stage is driven by governments designing systems to create more spaces and options for students – it is supported by the notion of ‘supply-side’ economics. This phase is marked by the pressing desire to increase participation, and higher education systems opened up a wide variety of educational offerings and routes to and through education in order to support the goals of human capital for a knowledge-based economy. There then occurs a shift towards a ‘market driven’ form of provision. The second stage of massification began in 1985, he argues, and is “most resolutely ‘market responsive’ and financially driven” (Neave, 2000: 15). In this stage, institutional offerings are abundant and institutions must compete for students and funding. When this occurs, and there are a plethora of educational offerings available, students need better signals of quality and systems require a different model of governance.

3.4 System Design

Knowledge based economies demand large, diverse, and differentiated higher education systems. Each country (or jurisdiction) has created a model of provision suitable to its own needs, developed at various times in various ways, with tailor-made institutional relationships with government and institution types, and manners in which postsecondary education credentials are offered. There are a number of ways to consider how governments sought to increase system capacity. Clark (1983), for example, puts forth that systems can be organised horizontally by distinguishing sectors (i.e., single public system single-sector or multiple-sector, multiple public
system multiple sectors, private and public systems: multiple-sectors) or vertically in identifying hierarchies (based on credential type or prestige and status through ‘institutional hierarchy’).

He further notes that the way the systems are organised reflects the relationship between three major forces in a system: state authority, academic oligarchy and the market (Clark, 1983). The extremely influential ‘Triangle of Coordination’ demonstrates the relative influence of each of the forces, and helps to conceptualise the factors that dictate system design.

3.4.1 Diversity and homogenization

Neave (2000) notes that the first stage of massification is to provide ‘structural provision’ and attributes the massification of Western European higher education almost wholly to state intervention and societal demand. Van Vught concurs that governments’ actively sought to offer access to students with varied backgrounds and academic achievements, support social mobility, meet the needs of the labour market, support political diversity, improve system effectiveness through specialisation and innovation, and allow for elite institutions to exist (Birnbaum, 1983; in Vught, 2009).

In order to support widespread participation in higher education, national systems needed to provide diverse options for the new diverse demands on the system. Neave (2000) suggests that, as a first step, many nations formalized two distinct sectors for university and vocational education. This model falls into Clark’s multiple public system multiple sectors model (1983). Others, Michael Skolnik (2005) for example, call this the binary system where academic institutions provide undergraduate and graduate degrees; and vocational institutions provide more technical diplomas.

In reviewing 15 OECD country systems, Shavit, Arum, Gamoran, and Menachem (2007) noted this binary model of higher education as one of two primary models employed around the world. The second, they found, was the ‘diversified model’, where there is mix of institutions stratified by ‘prestige, resources, and selectivity of students and faculty’.

Neave (2000) suggests that the second stage of mass education is the further diversification of institutions, primarily based on market demand and financial benefits, which could arguably be
the diversified model identified by Shavit et al. (2007). The second stage (which he argues began in 1985) saw even more variety in the types of providers and ways to categorise institutions. They can be examined for external (between institutions) or internal (within institution) diversity (Teichler, 2008). When considering external diversity, Birnbaum (1983; in Teichler, 2008) considers seven categories:

- Systemic diversity: institutional type, size and control
- Structural diversity: historical and legal foundations, or internal authority
- Programmatic diversity: mission, emphasis and credentials provision
- Procedural diversity: teaching, research and/or service provision
- Reputational diversity: status and prestige
- Constituential diversity: student and faculty
- Value and Climate diversity: social environment and culture

With the increasing variety of offerings, many scholars have noted that institutional diversity has, in fact, decreased: that there is a process of de-differentiation, or homogenisation, of institutions (Birnbaum, 1983; Neave, 1979; Neave, 2000; Vught, 2009). How this occurs in spite of governmental diversity policies is a phenomenon that can be explained through three major theories, which can also be seen as theories of isomorphism.

Very briefly, isomorphism is an organisational theory that helps to aid an understanding of why institutions may act in ways that promote convergence and similarity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In applying this theory to higher education (private higher education specifically), Levy (1999) discusses how coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphisms reduce the likelihood of diversity in provision. Coercive isomorphism is where institutions are required to comply with expectations. As an example, Birnbaum suggested that homogenization in the US was possibly due to government policies which, despite the goal of differentiation, have rigid approval criteria which force common institutional approaches (1983). Mimetic isomorphism is where institutions copy others they perceived as being successful. This is also the theory of ‘academic drift’ or ‘mission creep’: the notion that in a diversified system the model employed by ‘successful’
institutions is copied by others, thus reducing variation of educational offerings (Neave, 1979). Finally, normative isomorphism arises where there is an ideal organisational model based on “prior socialisation and dominant norms” (Levy, 1999: 19). Rhoades, similarly, suggests that de-differentiation occurs because of the power of academic norms and values (‘academic conservatism’) outweigh political will (1990).

Returning to the topic of learning outcomes, we can see how common expectations support the notions of de-differentiation: As governments are establishing learning outcomes, it is difficult, if not impossible, for institutions to operate outside the common policy norms, and therefore must comply with expectations, as suggested by Birnbaum (1983). Research in the European Union supports this theory, as a diminished difference between professional and academic programs and institutions is attributed to the harmonizing Bologna Process (European Commission, 2012). Similarly, these common expectations are often set by (or in collaboration with) academics, which supports Rhoades’ (1990) supposition of the power of academic conservatism. In fact, as previously noted, some scholars have suggested that learning outcomes are a key component of higher education standardization, reducing the autonomy of institutions and academic staff (Berlach, 2004; Furedi, 2012).

However, it can also be argued that learning outcomes support governmental goals of diversity. Skolnik (2015), for example, examined 11 jurisdictions’ quality assurance systems for learning outcomes activities as one component (amongst three others) that may impact diversity. His findings indicate that countries are able to maintain diversity between applied and academic programs either by having explicit outcomes for each sector or by having common learning outcomes broad enough to make them applicable to both applied and academic programs. Hence, he found that many jurisdictions have restrained the isomorphic pressures of quality assurance.

Similarly, establishing common expectations may reduce homogenisation as they reduce the need to micro-manage structural or day to day operations. If we consider a sports metaphor: when the bar is set it does not matter how one trains to reach it, so long as one is successful in reaching it. Berlach (2004: 2), for example, notes that outcomes-based education “prides itself on

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18 ‘Success’, of course, is subjective. In this case it tends to be regarded as those that have high student selectivity, attract research funding and government grants (i.e., high status research universities).
being largely syllabus free”. Therefore it can be argued that a government can be less rigid about state-level planning based on the ‘external’ issues of diversity as suggested by Birnbuam (1983), or Teichler's ‘vertical’ diversity (2008), because there is an overall expectation that the credentials gained are of a certain quality regardless of where they are achieved.

3.4.2 Privatisation and private provision

Providing students with a variety of institutional types and programmatic offerings can be a heavy burden on the public budget (Beerkens-Soo & Vossensteyn, 2009). Arguably, a government does not have to address the increasingly disparate educational needs of its population, and there are many arguments suggesting that increasing private education provisions is a reasonable means for increasing postsecondary education provisions (Altbach, 1999; Levy, 1999). Geiger suggests “privatisation can be defined … as the net addition of private resources for higher education or the substitution of private resources for public ones” (1988: 7).

Some private higher education, and indeed, the privatization of public higher education, has been part of education systems around the world for decades, but is an increasingly integral part of many higher education systems and is the most rapidly growing area of tertiary level education in many countries. Rhoades (2005) notes that the increase of private higher education is linked closely to neoliberal notions of reduced government spending. Private higher education can support growth and differentiation where existing public systems are reluctant to respond to student demand for places (Kent and Ramirez, 1999), and shifts the burden of financing from the government to private sources (Geiger, 1988).

A further benefit of private higher education is that it has the autonomy to adapt easily to labour market needs and conditions and is reflective of student interests (Altbach, 1999; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2004), which supports Neave’s (2000) notion of the market in the second phase of massification.\(^{19}\)

A nations’ historical provision of private education, as well as the size, shape and utility of the

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\(^{19}\) Levy, as discussed above, suggests that diversity of offerings through private provision may not actually be realised due to isomorphism (1999).
private system, helps to dictate how public authorities govern the privates. Governance can be extremely restrictive or relatively laissez-faire. However, in most western nations’ private systems are independent, and thus evade systematic public scrutiny and monitoring, and often lack transparent quality controls. Altbach (1999) suggests that many of the peripheral private sectors are ‘caveat emptor’ – buyer beware – as accountability measures are not well ingrained and quality has no guarantee. But, increasingly, there is a move to coordinate the public and private sectors and assign a more substantial role to private agencies in expanding the tertiary sectors.

In fact, research into US state’s higher education preparation, participation, and completion rates suggest that the involvement of private institutions in state’s strategic planning is a key factor in system wide success (Ramirez and Martin, 2009). In doing so, it is necessary to understand the contribution of private institutions, and to be able equate their provision with that of public providers existing within the system.

Considering the role of learning outcomes in private education, Allais (2010) argues that learning outcomes can be used to provide an objective means to understand the contribution of private education, protect students, support the integration of providers into the overall system (in order to facilitate student mobility), but do so at through arm’s-length regulation and limited oversight from government. Therefore learning outcomes in private higher education can be used as a tool to demonstrate the quality of programming to students and the public as well as regulatory bodies, to help ensure common standards between public and private sectors.

### 3.5 Corporatisation and competition

Working in this economy, increasingly privatized and differentiated higher education institutions compete with each other for government funding, research dollars, tuition dollars, public-private partnerships, foreign student intake and international opportunities for growth. Institutes are no longer able to exist without strategic financial planning, and are choosing to base themselves on the corporate business model to ensure success (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). To support this, new models of governance and organisation have been taken up by institutions, where the ideology is to manage an institution like a business running for profit: minimum input begets
maximum output and creates maximum profit (Bensimon, 1995). Under this framework there must be clear ‘deliverables’ and quantifiable results.

The simplest way of presenting ‘deliverables’ is in research capacity and, for many years, it has been a primary indicator of institutional success. The development of rankings and league tables (discussed below) has increased the significance of research outputs, putting pressure on institutions and faculties to increase research production (O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). As institutions strive to compete with each other, research has become a primary target, disadvantaging teaching and learning as a core part of an institution.

Paradoxically, as government funding has decreased and student tuition increased (in many parts of the world), it follows that the idea of ‘students’ is altered to see them as ‘customers’ of the institutions. In this vein, customers are being ‘sold’ brand images of institutions, and new ‘products’, such as professional degrees, have been developed to cater to new ‘markets’ (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Yet, with research being the focus of many institutions, and the correlation between research productivity and the quality of teaching and learning being minimal (Dill & Soo, 2005), or ‘loosely coupled’ at best (Hattie & Marsh, 1996) there is increasingly a disconnect between the goals and activities of institutions.

As with any ‘product’ both the public and students are demanding to know what they are paying for and where they can find the best quality of education. Increasingly institutions are not just in competition with other national institutions or local providers, but with institutions around the world vying for highly talented international students and the associated tuition dollars. Hence there is significant demand for better information on the quality of education by program, institution and nation.

### 3.6 Student and labour mobility

A bi-product of these highly complicated systems of higher education provision prevalent in student-demand-driven mass higher education are issues of mobility and degree recognition. Certainly this is an important factor for many systems juggling with large, differentiated (or even homogenous) systems, as, despite the categorizations of types, equivalencies are not well
established either vertically or horizontally. Because of this, there are challenges in transporting a course, program or credential from one institution to another.

In the Canadian province of Ontario, for example, a survey of 14 colleges and 10 universities found that nearly 8,000 students switched institutions in 2011 alone (Heath, 2012b). It is understandably, then, that Birtwistle (2009) states that many systems are focused on internal “lower-level” credential recognition. The case of Ontario perfectly exemplifies the need to support students as they navigate through their local postsecondary education offerings.

There is also movement across regional and jurisdictional boundaries. In a survey of 40 universities across Canada, it was found that approximately 8,000 students a year switch provinces during their postsecondary education. While the numbers are relatively small compared to the significant mobility of Europe, for example, the challenges within the system are significant. Lacking a common understanding and demonstration of credit worth (established through a clear transfer and articulation framework) upwards of 1,500 of those students lost prior credits (Heath, 2012a). As only an example of the significance of this issue, it brings to light the significant challenge within a region, costing the students, institutions and government unnecessary time and money (Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2013).

On a larger scale, the international movement of students and workers is substantial. In 2011 there were 4.5 million students studying abroad, a number which doubled from the previous year (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). That same year saw over 8 million people migrate to 35 OECD countries alone (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011; 2013).

Johnson and Wolf (2009) comment on how prevalent and yet constrained international mobility is currently. Despite the interconnected economies, they suggest that the international movement of individuals is more complex today than ever before due to the lack of cohesion and understanding of higher education credentials. Today, one needs to have their credentials recognised in order to successfully migrate and integrate into another country and labour market.

The need to have credentials recognised runs deep. It was a primary motivator for the European Union in establishing policies and activities that cumulated into the Lisbon, Copenhagen and
Bologna Accords seeking to coordinate European higher education and labour markets (Johnson & Wolf, 2009; Lennon, 2010a). Further abroad, however, indications of educational quality through credential recognition, is also needed. A significant indication of the demand for information on international education is the development of rankings and league tables to show reputation (Johnson & Wolf, 2009).

### 3.7 Rankings

If we agree that higher education is indeed a ‘market’ of providers and programs, it is understandable that significant efforts have been made to clarify this ‘market’: to demonstrate the ‘product’ of education to national and international stakeholders, including governments, the public, institutions, and students. It follows that many of ideas of classifying and sorting institutions made sense to academics and policy makers (i.e., the vertical/horizontal model), but the public also sought user friendly formats to help students and the broader community to make informed decisions. US News was a forerunner in the United States in 1983 (Wildavsky, 2010), and within a decade the model of national rankings (or league tables) was transported around the world. Given international competition between nations and individual institutions, increasingly institutions are judged on how they perform internationally, and in the later part of the 21st century international rankings emerged.

There are many criticisms of rankings exercises. These include the concern that the performance indicators (and/or calculation methods) do not provide an accurate account, that institutions can ‘game’ the system by bolstering their efforts to improve in some of the indicators (number of faculty with Nobel prizes, for example), and that teaching and learning is insufficiently addressed. Another significant concern with rankings is that the indicators heavily weigh research capacity, favouring comprehensive research-intensive universities over others, and Marginson and van der Wende (2007) also demonstrate how the rankings favour US/UK and other English speaking institutions.

Indications also rely heavily on a school’s wealth, reputation and the prior achievements of entering students. While each of these are inappropriate indicators of quality, reputational rankings are perhaps the most problematic due to what Solmon and Astin call the ‘halo effect’
(Bogue & Hall, 2003). In 1981, they found Princeton’s business school ranked as one of the top ten programs in the United States. Princeton does not have a business school. The judgements were made based on the perception of the entire institution rather than based on fact. In another example, Hawkins, Ritter and Walter found that an impressively named but non-existent economics journal was highly ranked (Hawkins, Lawrence, & Walter, 1973). These examples demonstrate how fickle rankings can be when based on reputation.

However well intentioned, rankings exercises offer only an insight into the quality of education, based on indictors designed to serve the purposes of identifying prestige: the “vertical differences between institutions and between nations, differences of power and authority” (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007: 326).

In response to criticisms, the rankings exercises are modified on a continual basis and over the past 10 years have slowly incorporated better indications of teaching and learning. The most recently developed exercise, U-multirank, has increased the weight of teaching and learning, and has also improved the way in which the information is presented to the public. Rather than being given one score – or ranking – institutions can be compared on a number of different elements that suit the interests of the reader (Amaral & Rosa, 2011; Vught, 2009). It does not attempt to categorize, map or classify institutions.

Despite the improvements in rankings exercises, they remain focused heavily on inputs and outputs of educational institutions and perceptions of reputation and insufficiently capture issues of teaching and learning or educational quality (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). Indeed, quality has remained elusive, not just in rankings.

### 3.8 Summary

Learning outcomes as a policy tool reside in an environment of dramatic changes in higher education and in the broader social, economic and political environment. The changing public expectations of education as an instrument of economic change and social reform have altered the who (is educated), how (it’s provided) and what (purpose it serves) of higher education. The way in which society appraises the value of higher education has also changed. Nations are
trying to determine how to recognise qualifications for the purposes of labour market mobility, systems of higher education are trying to understand and identify the type and level of education for compatibility and comparison purposes and students are hungry for information on the types and quality of providers and programs. With the increasingly complicated systems of higher education, how governments manage these demands is an important topic, and is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 4
The roles of regulation and evaluation

The increasing complexity of modern higher education systems described in Chapter 3 rationalises the need for, and growth in, regulatory activities. This chapter explores contemporary issues in higher education regulation. It first connects the broader trends in public policy to the growing role of regulation and oversight, and the different ways in which they are conceptualised. The second section explicitly addresses the different models of accountability, quality assurance and accreditation as the tools of contemporary regulatory activities. The question of quality, and how best to capture it, is the focus of the third section, followed by a discussion of the issue of evaluation in learning outcomes policies.

4.1 Contemporary issues in regulation

Regulation and oversight of government and public services became increasingly important in the later part of the 20th century in most western economies. El-Khawas notes the growing scholarship in the field in the 1980s, primarily due to the increased introduction of accountability policies and the government’s need for planning information, matched with theoretical concepts on how it was emerging (2007). Across Europe, for example, accountability became prominent as the nations moved towards an integrated economic zone with increasingly coordinated policies (Fisher, 2004).

During this time there was the development of a number of models of public governance including those based on bureaucracy, laws, professional norms and political demands (Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013). There can be hard accountability (regulated by laws) or soft accountability (regulated by collegial audits) (Middlehurst, 2011). It can be conducted through internal or external channels; be punitive or supportive; formal or informal; vertical, horizontal or diagonal (Bovens, 2007); direct or indirect; it can be based on responsibility, responsiveness, professionalism or control (Fisher, 2004). Similarly, it can be symbolic or functional (Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, & Vedung, E. O. (Eds.). (2011). There are also considerations of whether accountability measures ‘fit of purpose’ or ‘fit for purpose’ (Harvey & Newton, 2007).
These models are not mutually exclusive, but are attempts to understand how accountability is employed and the implications of different approaches. The models generally rely on a basic ‘principal-agent’ relationship where the ‘agent’ follows the directives of the ‘principal’ and is responsible for demonstrating compliance and achievement of targets. Many public services, however, do not operate in that linear model and are more suited to the model of ‘multiple accountabilities which recognises that agents can have numerous principals and be responsible to numerous forces (Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013). The regulation challenge, therefore, is about finding the balance between competing goals.20

Higher education is well suited to the multiple accountabilities model. As noted previously, Clark’s Triangle of Coordination identified the three most prominent influences on higher education system design (state control, academic oligarchy and market model) as a means to understand system design (1983).

Building on Clark’s work, Joseph Burke presents an Accountability Triangle for higher education. The Accountability Triangle is a tool to “assess the responsiveness of accountability programs to the three interests and pressures” that affect higher education: State Priorities (political), Academic Concerns (professional) and Market Forces (market) (Burke, 2005: 21). As a pioneer in the field of system design and accountability, Burke’s Accountability Triangle and his framework presenting various accountability models and features provided fodder for other scholars to further define the field.

In 2011, Robin Middlehurst developed the Accountability Diamond of Cross-Border Higher Education (see Figure 4.1 below) intending to support an understanding of global trends in accountability and highlight the important influence of international and trans-national issues (Middlehurst, 2011). In dealing specifically with cross-border higher education, she notes the pressures of international agreement and compatibility in accountability practices, and the challenges of regulating collaborations, imports and exports of higher education services. More broadly, the inclusion of the supranational component provides a useful model for viewing trends

20Koppell (2005) suggests that it is impossible to satisfy the needs of multiple accountabilities and attempting to do so may contribute to organisational dysfunction. This is known as the Multiple Accountabilities Disorder.
in higher education accountability (and learning outcomes) initiatives, as they are not entirely contained by political jurisdictions.

Figure 4.1: Accountability Diamond of Cross-border Higher Education

Including and recognising the supra-national – or transnational or international – influence on quality assurance is an important and relatively new notion in higher education. Altbach et al. (2010) for example, consider that while national quality assurance provides the ‘building blocks’ of international understanding and convention, it does not sufficiently explain the external forces that influence the direction of identifying the comparability and value of qualifications. The influence of non-governmental agencies in accountability and learning outcomes initiatives is significant. For example, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (INQAAHE), the EU, and the OECD are all involved in supporting best practice and collaborations, regardless of whether they have direct control of the development, implementation and assessment of policy and practice. Similarly, international collaborations and agreements are occurring, such as the Washington Accord, which regulates 17 national

\[\textit{Fisher (2004), comments that transnational governance was a critical force in the development of government wide accountability across the European Union.}\]
engineering accreditation agencies (Hanrahan, 2008). Hence, the role of these supra-national agencies and collaborations should not be underestimated as a powerful influencer in accountability schemes or learning outcomes activities.

4.2 Accountability, accreditation and quality assurance

Despite a 40 year history of literature there is still some confusion as to what the terms accountability, accreditation and quality assurance actually mean and a range of ways in which they can be defined, enacted and analysed, and the relationship between them.

For example, some consider accountability to be under the umbrella of quality assurance (Bogue, 2003) and others write that quality assurance is part of accountability (Harvey & Newton, 2007; Stensaker, 2008). Others argue quality assurance processes feed into accreditation schemes (Van Damme, 2004). Some use the terms accountability and accreditation but make no reference to quality assurance (Gaston, 2014). Some see three main models of accountability: Accreditation (used for status), assessment (used to make qualitative judgements on the quality of the programs), and audits (which check the achievements and processes of the institution based on its own explicit or implicit objectives) (Dill, Massy, Williams, & Cook, 1996; Woodhouse, 1999). Some believe that accreditation and accountability are the same (Torre & Zapata, nd), but Eaton (2012) claims that there is accreditation and, under that, are distinct models of quality assurance and quality improvement.

While there have been attempts to clarify the use of terms (see for example, UNESCO’s “Quality Assurance and Accreditation: Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions” (Vlasceanu, Grunberg, & Parlea, 2007)or Schwartz and Westerheijden (2004), the efforts have done little to standardize language and concepts in this ever growing field.

Nevertheless, the terms quite simply describe alternate sets of practice. In an effort to be universally applicable, in this study the term ‘Regulation’ is used as the umbrella term to encapsulate all of the models of institutional oversight. The term Accountability refers to government supervision of multiple aspects of institutions. Accreditation, alternatively, is a process of externally validating standards. Quality Assurance is a process of evaluating
institutionally designated goals utilizing two primary forms: assessments and audits. See Figure 4.2 below for a visual aid to this framework. It is recognised that this is an imperfect model, but serves as a simple tool to better understand the operational frameworks currently in place. Note that all types may be in place in the same system, and may be focused on the same or different levels (i.e., institution/program) or institutional type (i.e., college/university, public/private).

Figure 4.2: Regulation Framework

![Regulation Framework Diagram]

Accountability is where the government places obligations on institutions for which they must demonstrate compliance. Accountability may be directed to institutional performance (El-Khawas, 2007), but often refers to the responsibility to “report the stewardship of public funds” (Leveille, 2006: 31). Trow considers it the “obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect” (1996: 310).

Accountability, therefore, is not necessarily about quality (Bogue & Hall, 2003). Richardson and Martinez, for example, comparatively examined the policies of five US states using accountability agreement performance data, none of which required indicators of teaching and learning, student success or ‘quality’ (Lennon, 2009; Richardson & Martinez, 2009).

Accountability exists in all systems of publicly funded higher education. However, there may also be models of accreditation and quality assurance employed. This is generally determined by the historical relationships with the government and institutions, philosophies of academic

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22 Increasingly, however, qualifications frameworks/profiles are being included in agreements, and compliance may be used as a ‘quality indicator’.

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autonomy, and the public/private domain. Thus, while accreditation and quality assurance can be conducted by government, they are very often organised through arm’s-length agencies, non-governmental agencies, professional or member organisations, or through voluntary association.

Accreditation, a prevalent model, can be defined as “an evaluation process that ends with a summative judgement leading to a formal approval process of a programme or institution” (Sursock, 2011: 116). In many nations accreditation is primarily for professional programs, such as business, medicine or engineering. In other nations entire institutions are accredited. It is a public process that demonstrates a program/institution has met minimum standards based on self-assessment and external review. Accreditation seeks to establish and maintain consistent and rigorous standards (Gaston, 2014), and provides ‘status’ to those that demonstrate effectiveness (Woodhouse, 1999).

Quality Assurance refers to a regulation model that intends to enhance institutional improvement through external scrutiny. There are two primary models: assessment and audits. While similar in purpose they each have a slightly different focus, though are not mutually exclusive and can be used together. D’Andrea (2007) suggests that the assessment model tends to use quantitative approaches to examine standards or expectations established within the institutions/program, and El-Khawas notes they are generally aimed at identifying and evaluating the effects of teaching and learning (2007). Assessment mechanisms aim to provide information on quality of outputs rather than summary, or binary, indications of achievements (Kis, 2005).

Quality audits are conducted by peer-review evaluations of whether or not stated criteria have been met (the criteria are typically designated by the programme/institution). Dill, Massy, Williams and Cook (1996: 22) defined an institutional audit as “an externally driven peer review of internal quality assurance, assessment and improvement systems”. Blackmur (2010, p. 68) likens audits to an academic ‘raiding party’, where summative judgments are made on ill-defined notions of quality, and Skolnik cautions that audits can be conducted by ‘connoisseurs’, where tastes in academic matters are not made explicit, yet have significant impact (Skolnik, 1989). Yet, audits tend to evaluate processes and methods rather than actual quality, and do not have established benchmarks (Amaral & Rosa, 2011). Hence, the process is more focused on “structural, organisational and managerial processes within higher education institutions”
(Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, & Westerheijden, 2011: 465). Dill 2006, P 11) notes audits “make no attempt to comprehensively review an institution’s resources and activities, but rather are focused on those processes by which universities assure their academic standards”. Suggesting that academic audits focus not on focus is not on “quality,” but on “quality work.”

4.3 The value of regulation

In efforts to improve quality, each of the regulation models has downsides and benefits. For example, Harvey notes (1994) that while accountability might identify issues and force improvement in certain areas, the changes won’t necessarily be sustained. Furthermore, accountability may not promote continuous improvement: changes may be made to support compliance but in a way that will be the least disruptive to the common activities as institutions and staff may be both sceptical of the expectations and demotivated to engage.

Accreditation, which seeks to maintain consistent and rigorous standards, may support a deprofessionalization of academia through standardisation and, therefore, inhibit innovation (Blackmur, 2008). It may also reduce quality improvement as the model may support burying unfavourable information (Trow, 1996). A more fundamental argument suggests that the model of established criteria threatens the value of education by promoting the commodification and homogenization of learning (Giroux, 2014).

Quality assurance mechanisms, alternatively, can be soft, over-friendly and over-reliant on self-assessment reports and therefore ineffective at identifying low-quality (Amaral & Rosa, 2011). Blackmur (2007) suggests that peer-review audits might reduce innovation as new models and ideas may not be accepted within the common norms of a field or practice, and therefore innovative activities may not be encouraged. Furthermore, Amaral and Rosa find that when examining the use of audits in the Institutional Evaluation Programme of the EUA, the activities did not contribute to the transparency and comparability of programming across the EU (despite being an explicit purpose of the programme), as they focused on structural and organisational issues (2011).
These issues highlight the fundamental debate in regulation literature: Is the purpose to ensure institutions/programs meet a benchmark or to help them set it: to judge or to support. Many scholars believe there is a fundamental dichotomy between accountability and improvement, arguing that academic values are at odds with external judgements and reward systems (i.e., Clark & Swain, 2015; Trow, 1996). Kinzie (2010) observes that accountability and improvement do not rest comfortably together, suggesting the accountability paradigm is characterized by external influence, summative judgement, compliance, and a reporting ethos. The products are standardized and comparative measures, and intended to be publicly reported. By comparison, the improvement paradigm is internally-motivated, features formative feedbacks, employs multiple instruments, and stresses internal communication.

Peter Ewell provides a nice summary of the contrasting characteristics of the two paradigms (see Table 4 below) (2009). He relates the improvement/accountability paradigms specifically to assessment activities, but the notions are relevant at the broader level also.

Table 4.1: Two Paradigms of Regulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Dimensions</th>
<th>Improvement Paradigm</th>
<th>Accountability Paradigm</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intent</td>
<td>Formative (improvement)</td>
<td>Summative (judgment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>External</td>
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<tr>
<td>Predominant Ethos</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Application Choices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication of Results</td>
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<td>Use of Results</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(modified from Ewell, 2009: 8)

Alternatively, Massy doesn’t think improvement and accountability are at odds. He suggests expectations need be viewed by all as fair with common goals, salient consequences and robust performance measures with meaningful rewards and punishments (Massy, 2011). If these elements are satisfied then it is possible to fulfil all purposes. Similarly, it may simply be the conflict of improvement and accountability are really conflicts about differences in opinion about
what constitutes quality and from whose perspective. Nonetheless, it is suggested that the pendulum swings for many nations on how they choose to employ and enact accountability and quality assurance measures and they are likely to drift from improvement to accountability and vice versa (Ewell, 2009; Sursock, 2011). Burke suggests that the shifts are slightly more unidirectional in the direction of oversight, noting accountability has “shifted over time from efficiency to quality to productivity and, finally, to responsiveness to public priorities and market demand” (2005: 10). In an example from Ireland, research found that policies moved the quality assurance model from “collegial, developmental, formative, quality enhancement focused stance towards a more independent, judgemental, accountability-driven role” (Williams, Eaton, & Teixeira, 2014: 8).

There has been a definite shift towards the accreditation model in the past few years, particularly in Europe (Sursock, 2011; Van Damme, 2004; Wahlen, 2004). Trow might argue that this is because accreditation is the more appropriate model for market based systems (Trow, 1996). Another possible reason for why accreditation has become a prevalent model is that there are now better indicators of quality. When there are clearly agreed upon identifiers of achievement and quality there is less need to monitor the organisational and process functions (which is the primary function of both accountability and quality assurance activities). “The illusory relationship between accountability/compliance and improvement evaporates when the focus in on the essential nature of quality itself” (Harvey & Newton, 2007: 232). Similarly, according to Stensaker, Rosa, & Westerheijden, “when you’ve got standards you don’t need instruments controlling and coordinating complex relationships” (2007: 252). This is important to note, as research (particularly in the US) indicates that accreditation has been a major driver of reform and development of learning outcomes (Banta, 2007; Gannon-Slater, Ikenberry, Jankowski, & Kuh, 2014; Kinzie, 2010; Wright, 2002).

4.4 Capturing quality

There is a long history of trying to measure and evaluate educational quality (Bogue & Hall, 2003), and yet still there are a variety of opinions on what it entails and considerable controversy about how best to measure it (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). Trow (1996: 321) contends that “education is a process pretending to have an outcome” suggesting that capturing quality is
impossible. Similarly, the well regarded commentator on US higher education Robert Zemsky considers quality to be one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse haunting higher education today\(^{23}\), and contemplates that the lack of meaning and understanding of educational quality means that the term holds little purpose for anything other than branding (2011).

Harvey and Newton discuss the challenges of capturing the illusive ‘essence’ of quality, and consider how it can be related to ‘fitness for and fitness of purpose’, ‘value for money’ and ‘achieving excellence’ (Harvey & Newton, 2007). The difficulties in identifying quality are so great that many do not define quality at all, or, quite often, link the notion of quality directly to expectations or standards. For example, one definition put forth by Crosby (1985) is that “quality is conformance to requirements”. Another proposal stipulates “Did the product do what I expected it to? If the answer is yes, then it’s a quality product. If the answer is no then it isn’t” (Guaspari, 1985: 10).

Specifically on higher education quality, Bogue (2003: 14) asserts, “Quality is conformance to mission specification and goal achievement – within publicly accepted standards of accountability and integrity”. With these illusive definitions and notions, quality in accountability, accreditation, and quality assurance schemes, therefore, can be found in many places.

Traditional approaches to capturing ill-defined quality fall into three categories: inputs, throughputs and outputs; labour market outcomes; and, proxies (Norrie & Lennon, 2013). Some of these traditional measures are useful for planning purposes but have well-known limitations as quality indicators. In fact, over 20 years ago, Alexander Astin (1993) called for a new model for evaluating quality based less on institutional resources and more on the student talent developed by the institution. However, these indicators are still prevalent in all forms of regulation (accountability, accreditation and quality enhancement) and public sources of information.

The first approach is measuring inputs (entering GPA, funding, library holdings, faculty with PhDs, etc.), throughputs (retention rate, student mobility, etc.) and outputs (graduation rate, PhDs produced, research publications, etc.) and has been the yardstick of performance both

\[^{23}\text{The other three horsemen are access, affordability and accountability.}\]
within systems and internationally for decades. Examining educational processes is also part of this input/output approach. For example, nominal statements of course credit hours, faculty contact hours, programs with comprehensive exams, number of programs online, etc. provide information on the activities occurring in a program. While valuable information, these performance indicators are not necessarily reflective of the quality of education provided. Johnson and Wolf (2009: 9) suggest that “assessing the quality of an institution in terms of teaching staff, its programs and its facilities…is not sufficient to assess the validity of comparative judgement”.

A second approach is to track labour market outcomes of graduates (Norrie & Lennon, 2013). Common indicators include unemployment rates, salary, the link between program and employment type, etc. While important, these indicators say very little about the educational program itself. They are just as easily reflections of the labour market or the pre-existing socio-economic status of entering students. Furthermore, labour market outcomes of graduates do not provide a comparative indication of educational quality; instead they might provide an indication of the regional or national economy.

Recognizing a gap in information of educational quality led to the inclusion of a third set of indicators identified as ‘proxies’ (Norrie & Lennon, 2013). These ‘proxies’ of quality include student evaluations and surveys of satisfaction and engagement which became popular in the 1990s following work by Spaeth and Greeley (1970) and Astin (1977) in the 1970s. The premise is that if the student is engaged and satisfied with their education or has fared well in life beyond postsecondary education then the institution must have provided high quality education. The promise and prevalence of these types of indicators was so high in the early 2000s that the Chair of the Academy for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching in UK (now the Higher Education Academy) claimed “The student experience is the main function of higher education. We have to take that experience seriously” (McInnis, 2005: 85). Indeed, there is evidence that these proxies are useful in that they correlate to student academic success (Kinzie, 2010) and do provide information for system level understanding for supporting student centred education (Xia & Zhong, 2014).
However, as an evaluation method, they ultimately provide only ‘customer service satisfaction’ information (Vartiainen, 2004), and can be subjective (Stark & Freishtat, 2014). For example, though extremely favourable in his writing on the value of student surveys, Bogue (2003) notes that satisfaction is related to expectations: a student attending a higher education institution for intellectual/general education or career/professional purposes can have very different opinions both during and following their program.

Importantly, however, satisfaction and engagement do not equate to learning. Just because a student was pleased with the instructor, pleased that the course was not too demanding, or played on the collegiate basketball team does not necessarily mean they acquired the knowledge, skills, and competencies expected. Carini, Kuh, and Klein, for example, find that there is a very small positive relationship between engagement with critical thinking skills and grades, but the variance was better described by differences in entering grades or institutional type (2006). Lee Shulman of the Carnegie Foundation strongly believed that engagement was not the same as learning and spent years focused on developing teaching and learning improvements as a means to enhance educational quality (Brint, 2009).

McInnis (2005) notes the emergence of student satisfaction as an important driver in the interest and investment in teaching and learning. This focus on the student experience (which he notes includes “clearly articulated targets for graduate attributes”) (McInnis, 2005: 83) saw the development of national and institutional agencies, units, and departments focused on educational improvement.

Despite the fact that the teaching and learning movement gained traction in the 2000s (and supported improved teaching practices, activities, and student assessments), the successes were largely invisible to those outside the classrooms. The black box of education remained, and there was a lack of evidence to support understanding of improvements in order to inform decision making: “Without evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning, the improvement of teaching becomes a hit-and-miss exercise, and without systematic monitoring of student performance and progress, there is little chance of institutional learning” (McInnis, 2005: 86). There remained a need to pull teaching and learning activities and indicators outside of the
classroom, and identify indications of teaching and learning achievement that can be understood and evaluated externally (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011a).

Hence, learning outcomes have emerged in the past 15 years as a fourth category of ‘quality’. They provide clearly articulated expectations of student knowledge, skills and abilities, with associated demonstration of achievement that can be used as indicators of educational quality. They can be understood externally, used comparatively, and are appropriate for accountability and quality assurance frameworks. Teichler and Shomburg (2013) suggest that incorporating learning outcomes into accountability regimes provides quantifiable information on the quality of education. Hence, learning outcomes are now being ingrained in regulatory regimes, both inside institutions and externally.

4.5 Challenges in evaluation

The previous sections have described how regulation processes establish frameworks for monitoring the institutions, and the ways in which ‘quality’ is articulated and captured. In Chapter two an outline of learning outcomes concepts presented the different ways they are conceptualised and utilized by a range of actors with a variety of intentions. This section considers the way in which learning outcomes are being evaluated for success within regulation schemes.

The introduction of learning outcomes policies or programs can be viewed as a “formulated response to a problem” (Inwood, 2004: 207) with intended goals, short term and long-term impacts, and associated activities/strategies to achieve them (Patton, 1998; Rossi et al., 2004). As such, they are exposed to being evaluated like any other policy or program because quality assurance is a policy domain (Perellon, 2007).

Figure 4.3 below theorizes the development of learning outcomes activities as a policy process (Coates & Lennon, 2014). While developed for the purpose of tracking the development of assessment activities, the model works equally well for any of the initiative types (i.e., articulation, implementation), because it follows the basic rules of policy and program

Figure 4.3: Assessment Transparency Model (ATM)

(Coates & Lennon, 2014: 300)

The model shows the various stages of the policy process (maturity), and the various activities associated with the developments. Each of the levels of activities can go through each of the maturity processes, though not necessarily in a linear fashion. Activities begin in the bottom left corner where initiatives are haphazard and ad-hoc, will move toward the final complete stage of amalgamation into the mainstream be party to on going evaluation. Any program, institution, system, etc. can map its activities to this transparency model to determine the stage of development in learning outcomes initiatives.

The evaluation component is critical. Scientific evaluation (or evaluation research) examines effectiveness (goal achievement) and efficiency (relationship between costs and benefits of
program, projects and organisations) adapted to political and organisational environments using broad social science methods (Rossi et al., 2004; Spiel, Schober, & Reimann, 2013). Program evaluation, on the other hand, is slightly more practical. It is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of policies and programs in order to make judgements about the program, improve program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming (Rossi et al., 2004). It can examine processes or outcomes: be formative or summative as described in Figure 4.4 below.

Figure 4.4: Evaluation stage and type of techniques

![Formative and Summative Evaluation Diagram](Modified from My Environmental Education Evaluation Resource Assistant, 2014)

Formative evaluations occur during program development and implementation to support the ongoing feedback and assist in the development of program goals (Vartiainen, 2004). The focus of the assessment is on finding ways to improve rather than on quantifying current levels of success. It focuses on inputs and activities, often monitoring operations and service delivery satisfaction. While formative assessments are legitimate evaluation tools, they are not sufficient to answer the question of how well initiatives are doing at achieving their ultimate goals.
Summative evaluations are conducted on an established policy/program. They are based on the goals and baseline data collected in the previous stages (when and if possible) in order to review the extent to which goals are being achieved. The outcome evaluation examines short or mid-term goals (what can be considered purposes, objectives, or outputs) to examine results. Impact evaluations examine the achievement of long-term goals and also consider unintended side effects. Impact can be hard to quantify as it requires establishing that it was the program/policy specifically that had the intended effect, rather than any other factors (Rossi et al., 2004). Summative assessments are intended to determine whether or not overall goals have been achieved and to determine if there have been any unintended consequences.

4.5.1 Formative evaluations of learning outcomes

Formative assessments are the most common activity in quality assurance and learning outcome evaluations. Partly this is due to the relative infancy of many policies and activities. Despite not providing outcomes information on the relative value of the policy, formative research provides valuable insight into the activities and potential for success nonetheless. The section below highlights how some of the formative research in learning outcomes in quality assurance has provided useful insight into implementation issues.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, for example, has conducted a significant amount of research on the use and uptake of learning outcomes across the United States. Numerous reports have mapped the state-wide and institutional policies noting the trends in accountability processes as well as institutional activities (see, for example, Ewell, 2007; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). Recent research has assessed the emphasis of learning outcomes regionally, finding a range of ‘drivers’ and extent to which they are used for various purposes (Gannon-Slater et al., 2014).

As an example of how learning outcomes are being used in one jurisdiction (Ontario), Lennon & Frank (2014) examine various accountability and quality assurance agencies regulatory frameworks to understand the intensity of learning outcomes integration. What was apparent in this particular case study was that there was no requirement of demonstrating that students have achieved the learning outcomes in the regulatory models. Regardless of the type, focus or level
of expectation there is no expectation that institutions need to prove they are actually meeting their goals in the reporting processes. They must demonstrate that they have the processes in place but do not have to systematically show student achievement. While this particular research only examined one jurisdiction, other research examining the Bologna Accord signatory countries discovered that while most countries have formally established learning outcomes (based on the European Qualifications Framework), only half encourage it for use in curriculum development or assessment (European Commission, 2012).

These examples of formative process evaluations provide information on how programming may or may not support the achievement of goals. In some cases, the leadership of an institution can influence uptake of the polies, in other cases, it may be the use of the outcomes – i.e., that while competencies are established there is no expectation that student achievement of outcomes is shown. It seems that despite good intentions and the belief that learning outcomes have value they are not yet fully incorporated into systems or cultures of quality assurance and regulation.

Considering the relatively recent introduction of the concepts of learning outcomes (and the slower uptake of the notions in different regions), the progressive introduction is somewhat understandable, as there are a variety of activities that need to occur before learning outcomes are fully ingrained. However, the lack of sanctions, or perhaps the lack of ‘teeth’ associated with the integration of learning outcomes of these regulations, might be a hindrance to complete incorporation. An examination of the qualifications frameworks in Australia for example, called the framework “useless” (Baird, 2011: 40), in Canada, one framework was described as “little known, and (without) a great deal of impact” (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011: 4). In Europe, considerations on the uptake of learning outcomes (in qualifications frameworks) suggest that “countries that choose not to make a learning outcomes approach compulsory through laws and regulations should step up their activities to encourage implementation” (European Commission, 2012: 50).

Considering that most regulatory frameworks are not legally binding, Massy (2011) presents a model by which to examine the uptake of accountability initiatives in systems. Through examining the way agencies allocate the punishments and rewards it is possible to identify how or why a system is or is not embracing accountability schemes. In a similar style of formative
research, Stensaker explored the underlying assumptions of change in quality assurance activities and the “gap between ambitions and outcomes” (Stensaker, 2008: 5) found four primary influences on the impact of quality assurance: power, professionalism, public relations, and permeability. Both of these studies provide interesting models of formative evaluation of quality assurance models and activities. However, neither addresses the summative issues which identify the goal achievement or impact of uptake.

4.5.2 Summative evaluations of learning outcomes

Assessing the impact of learning outcomes is difficult, just as it is hard to tease out the impact of quality assurance from broader accountability initiatives (Sursock, 2011). Identifying impact in education policy at all is challenging, as change is often invisible, incremental and slow (Kis, 2005).

At the conclusion of a book on trends in quality assurance, Stensaker, Rosa, and Westerheijden note that there is a lack of specific objectives in the policies and implemented initiatives (2007). While they suggest this is not a bad thing as it allows for experimentation, it does become a major issue for how impact studies are conducted in higher education. It is a double-edged sword, as the lack of stated objectives supports the local uptake and ownership, but it also makes it difficult to analyse for impact (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011b). Young (2003) similarly suggests that the broad goals and rhetoric of learning outcomes (in qualifications frameworks) make it difficult to disagree with the ideas, but it does not allow for an understanding of the explicit purposes.

For example, an Irish review found it impossible to determine if their quality assurance processes were exacting any change, as there was no definition of quality, quality improvement or the student experience. The lack of definitions and clear underpinnings made it impossible to assess if stated goals were achieved (Williams et al., 2014).

This lack of clarity may be a contributing element to the fact that the outputs or performance measures associated with learning outcomes activities are rarely stated. This presents another barrier to proper summative evaluations: lack of transparent and good quality indicators. Performance measurements (qualitative or quantitative) need to be appropriate, be benchmarked
at the outset, and data need to be collected. The European Commission conducted an evaluation of the Bologna Process in 2012, nearly 15 years after its introduction. Having recently established the target of 20% student mobility by 2020, they are not able to judge the success of achievement because appropriate data are not available or collected (European Commission, 2012: 13). So, while the intention is there, it is impossible to properly assess the outcomes or impacts.

Qualifications frameworks, however, offer a good opportunity to examine impact as they are usually established with clear implementation objectives and goals (i.e., improved relationships between education, training, and the labour market). A review of qualifications frameworks conducted in 16 countries (Allais et al., 2009; Allais, 2010) largely focused on the formative development of the qualifications frameworks. The reports identify trends and differences in implementation and help shape the understandings of qualifications frameworks. For example, they can be used for communication purposes (Scotland) or for exacting major change (South Africa). They also note the challenges of policy borrowing the ideas of qualifications frameworks without considering the specific needs of the ‘importing’ country (Allais, Young, & Raffe, 2009).

Relating specifically to impact, Allais et al. comment that a major challenge of evaluating the NQF’s is the lack of objective goals in the frameworks (Allais et al., 2009). Similar comments were in the misalignment of goals and the reality of what could be reasonably expected. Allais, for example, found little evidence that NQF’s were achieving their stated goals, and that learning outcomes, specifically, were not found useful in “making decisions about the location of qualifications, or about credit transfer” (Allais, 2010: 3). Arguably this could be seen as an examination of the formative/implementation issues and the long term goals, the achievement of shorter term expectations were not explored: there was no analysis of the achievement of outputs – short and mid-term outcomes. Knowing that impact – long term outcomes – are hard to see, perhaps an evaluation of the short- and mid-term outcomes might have been more appropriate.

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24 Note that although the research on Bologna is an implementation report, the lack of transparent data has implications for summative research.
Thus, these outcome and impact results provide little information on the contribution of learning outcomes or their potential value. Given the amount of energy, time and funding provided by governments, quality assurance agencies, and institutions around the world, the blind faith in it is entirely possible, however, that other summative research has been conducted that might provide more information. Given that the work is likely to have been conducted by government, accreditation and quality assurance organisations, it is likely that the information lies with them, and is not made publically available.

4.6 Summary

This chapter presented the primary issues in higher education regulation today. It reviewed the different ways in which regulation is conceptually organised, and how it serves to assess educational quality through various tactics. It also raised the point that evaluation is critical to close the policy loop on quality assurance process, and noted that current literature lacks information on the impact of regulatory activities in the area of learning outcomes. A review of the literature on these issues illuminated the key concepts that ground the current study and provide a foundation for the analysis of data presented in the next three chapters.

Another possibility is that the evaluation models used were not appropriate to make summative judgements. However, this research, as in initial exploration into the area, will not be able to provide in-depth analysis of evaluation models.
Chapter 5
Global trends in learning outcomes initiatives

As part of this study, in February 2015, 330 higher education regulatory organisations around the world were invited to participate in a survey on their use of learning outcomes. The intention of the survey was to collect information on the state of learning outcomes policies and activities across the globe and uncover policy goals, activities, and any evaluations that may have occurred.

This chapter reviews and analyses the responses from the survey. The first section describes the structure and function of the responding organizations, the second provides information on learning outcomes policy/framework documents, the third investigates implementation issues, and the fourth section inquires about evaluations conducted. Based on the survey data the final section of this chapter attempts to respond to the primary research questions seeking information and trends in the stated goals, methods of implementation and evidence, and the state of evaluation research.

5.1 Survey sample

A total of 408 organisations were identified as the target population as they were members in either the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) or the International Group of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CIQG). As described in Chapter 1, 29 CIQG agencies were disqualified, and another 49 were removed from the population as they were duplicated in the two membership lists, leaving the total number of agencies contacted at 330. The target response rate for 330, based on a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error of 5% is 45%, or 149.

The 330 targeted agencies were contacted via email with a formal invitation to participate, a brief overview of the survey, and a link to the online survey provider “Survey Monkey”. Of the emails

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26 The terms organisation and agency are used interchangeably in this chapter.
27 See Appendix A for survey questions.
28 Removed from the pool for lack of contact information or for being an individual rather than an organisation.
sent, 18 bounced back as some recipients blocked all correspondence from Survey Monkey. The survey was available for 10 days, and recipients were sent a reminder after 5 days, and contacted again the day before the survey closed with a final reminder and request for participation.

A total of 73 responses were collected via Survey Monkey, and one participant requested the survey be conducted over the telephone, providing a total response rate of 22.42%. The small response rate limits both the level of statistical analysis that can be conducted and the certainty of any findings. Hence, the analysis of the findings only provides insights into possible trends; and statements about the data are thus descriptive rather than assertions of statistical significance in the relationships.

In order to collect the most pertinent information from participants, some questions were used as filters to ensure only relevant questions were asked. For this reason the survey sample (N=74) changes and gets smaller as the questions probe deeper into activities. For example, both INQAAHE and CIQG are member-based organisations and therefore not all respondents are regulatory bodies. In this case, of the initial 74 respondents, 13 (or 18%) indicated they were a university or college rather than a higher education organisation, and a subsequent question revealed that another 4 (5%) did not have regulatory powers. In both cases, the respondents were excluded from subsequent questions. Later, another 10 (14%) were dismissed from the remainder of the survey questions for not having a learning outcomes policy/framework. A total of 47 organisations completed the majority of the questions relating to organisational characteristics, learning outcomes policy/frameworks and implementation activities. However, participants were also able to skip any question, therefore the number of responses (N) per question fluctuates.

### 5.2 Respondent characteristics

The respondents were geographically diverse coming from 43 different countries around the world (N=65) (See Figure 5.1) with the majority originating in the EU, Asia and North America. Figure 5.2 shows the sample has a similar representation to the population and therefore the findings of the survey can be considered illustrative. Note that the ‘global’ option was provided for organisations that are not geographically tied to one country alone, such as the Asia Pacific Quality Network.
Figure 5.1: Map of participating organisations

Figure 5.2: Geographical representation

- Survey population (N=330)
- Survey respondents (N=65)
The majority of the respondents operate in a country that has a higher education system articulated through a multi-national or national qualifications framework, and most operate under the umbrella of more than one. This suggests that regardless of additional regulatory policies on learning outcomes there are overarching principles in place that instil common expectations of credentials.

Respondents were predominately arm’s-length government or private/member-based organisations (see Figure 5.3), nearly half of which were created between 2000 and 2009 (N=58). This suggests the agencies have a fair amount of autonomy and independence from government in their decision-making and activities.

Figure 5.3: Organisational type

Nearly half of the agencies have responsibilities to regulate credential provision at the national level and another 37% have the additional responsibility for international/multi-national activities (N=44). Reviewing the sphere of regulatory power by region, Africa and the European Union tend to have international or multinational responsibilities, where Asian and North American participants tend to focus on national regulation.
As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, there are three primary models for regulation: quality assurance, accountability and accreditation. The survey inquired about regulatory ‘style’ by asking how the organisation regulates instead of asking them to self-identify as a specific type of agency. The survey offered four possible responses with a brief definition for easy identification:

- Accountability agreements (government set obligations on institutions for which they must demonstrate compliance)
- Accreditation processes (an evaluation process that ends with a summative judgement leading to a formal approval of a program or institution)
- Quality assurance (audits/assessments) (evaluation of institutionally designated goals through external scrutiny)
- Other

This was intended to protect against skewing of the data by differences in use of terms, and between organisational name or title and actual activities.

Figure 5.4: Type of regulation
Organisations were asked to identify the types of regulations in which they are involved. Of 42 respondents, 25 reported involvement in accreditation-style regulation, 15 indicated involvement in quality assurance, and two indicated involvement in the accreditation process (see Figure 5.4). Deeper investigation through cross-tabulation revealed that the EU and US had more accreditation agencies participating, but no other particular trends in the types of regulation type related to the geographical location of the organisation were noted. Approximately 70% of the respondents are responsible for regulating the provision of undergraduate and graduate degrees at public and private institutions, and nearly 20% have responsibility for college diplomas.

5.3 Learning outcomes policies and framework

Respondents were asked whether they had in place, or were in the process of developing, a policy or framework for learning outcomes. Of 42 survey respondents, 52% had a policy or framework in place, and one was in the process of developing a policy or framework. Over 80% of the policies were developed between 2005 and 2012. Cross-tabulations of the question revealed no apparent patterns in the geographical location, organisational type (i.e., government, member-based), or sphere of power correlating to whether or not they had a policy. Similarly, there is no obvious difference in the likelihood of having a policy based on regulatory type, where about 50% of the three agency types each had a policy.

5.3.1 Implementation issues

The organisations were asked to identify what were cited as anticipated benefits – the long-term goals – of introducing a learning outcomes policy or framework for both their organisation and their constituent institutions (see Figure 5.5). While there were fewer stated benefits for the organisation itself, the most common long-term goals identified were improvement in ‘transparency’ and ‘regional/international comparison’. The goals for the institutions were more clearly highlighted by respondents, with ‘student learning’ being the most commonly cited goal, along with ‘institutional improvement’.
Respondents were also asked if short-term goals or targets were established at the time that the policy/framework was introduced. Of 28 respondents, 57% had established short-term targets for their institutions, though only 39% had developed internal organisational targets. As a point of interest, it should be recalled from Chapter 4, that that without short-term targets it is difficult to assess the success of a policy.

Similar to the response to the question on the long-term benefits of the policies, the organisations had fewer internal targets for their policies/frameworks, but were more precise in articulating the short-term targets for their institutions. When asked what types of goals were established, five options were provided:

- Articulating learning outcomes
- Implementing learning outcomes
- Measuring/assessing learning outcomes (i.e., large-scale or in class assessments)
- Signalling/demonstrating student achievement of learning outcomes (i.e., e-portfolios)
- Other
Figure 5.6 indicates the variety of targets set by the institutions and agencies, providing insight on the current focus of their goals. While common policy practice suggests that those focused on the assessment are more ‘mature’ in the policy process than those at the articulation stage (i.e., first determine what you what to assess and then assess it), this is not necessarily so. It is quite possible that organisations skip the articulation stage (if using a qualifications framework, for example) and go directly to implementation or assessment. Thus, readers are cautioned not to relate these activities to the relative maturity of the policy/frameworks (as described in section 4.5).

Figure 5.6: Short-term goals established

The agencies were then asked three questions about the acceptance of the policy/framework by their stakeholders. The first question inquired about the arguments against the introduction of the policy/framework (see Figure 5.7). Responses indicate that the most common concern was related to the practical administrative burden associated with the introduction of learning outcomes. Another common argument was more philosophical, and related to the homogenisation and commodification of education. The one respondent that selected ‘other’
indicated that there was no direct resistance to implementing a learning outcomes policy framework; rather, it was general inertia.

Figure 5.7: Arguments against learning outcomes

The second question on resistance to learning outcomes policies inquired about who made the arguments (see Figure 5.8). Perhaps it is not surprising that over 50% came from individual academics and programs, as they are likely concerned with academic freedom and autonomy in the classroom. Faculty associations/unions represent 5% of the ‘resisters’. While this number may seem low it is possible that unions are supportive of the learning outcomes policies, but it may also be due to the lack of faculty unions in the responding jurisdictions. In retrospect, the survey could have asked about champions of learning outcomes policy, as identifying major supporters could have provided as much, or even more information about the implementation process.
Figure 5.8: Arguments against learning outcomes came from:

Asking the two questions on resistance was important because the success of learning outcomes (as in any policy) rests in proper acceptance, implementation and integration into operations. However, an early hypothesis of this study was that there has been little empirical research conducted, and thus it was useful to follow the questions with an inquiry about how the information on resistance was gathered. Figure 5.9 shows that the largest portion of the 32 respondents indicated that their responses were founded on anecdotal and informal information. One of the respondents indicated that a taskforce formally requested feedback, but collected it in an informal way.
The next set of questions examined what was being introduced as part of the policy/framework. Were there sets of learning outcomes? Were clear expectations set out? If so, how was achievement recognised?

Of 29 respondents, 13 provide learning outcomes to their institutions either through a predetermined set of learning outcomes (though 5 are still developing their ‘set’), or through the NQF. However, 16 agencies encourage or require institutions or programs to establish learning outcomes internally. Of the 16 agencies, nine were supported to develop their own internal learning outcomes rather than use other existing sets.

Table 5.1 below indicates the breakdown of regulatory type with their own set of established learning outcomes. Accreditation agencies overwhelmingly require or suggest institutions set their own learning outcomes, where quality assurance agencies are more likely to have (or be

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30 A subsequent question inquired about how the ‘sets’ were developed (Adapted from the QF (4), developed by experts (2), developed by faculty members (1), or ‘other’ (3). The range of responses suggests that the qualifications framework may not be the foundation for other learning outcomes work.
developing) a set of learning outcomes. This is somewhat at odds with the logic that accreditation has clearly established standards that need to be met, where and quality assurance activities are intended to support the institutions in their processes.

Table 5.1: Regulatory type and use of learning outcomes 'sets'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Developing a 'set'</th>
<th>Established a 'set'</th>
<th>Institutions encouraged to develop own</th>
<th>Institutions must develop own</th>
<th>Use NQF</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability agreement agencies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation process agencies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality assurance agencies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seeking further trends in the use of established sets of learning outcomes, analysis shows that the European Union primarily requires the creation of internally developed institutional or program learning outcomes, but there is otherwise a wide range of activities by region.

Regardless of the type of learning outcomes in place, organisations were asked if they required evidence of compliance. Each of the 27 respondents indicated that they demand some form of implementation evidence. Figure 5.10 demonstrates that accreditation agencies are slightly more advanced in this requirement, but that quality assurance agencies are working to develop the expectations of implementation evidence.
Figure 5.10: Implementation evidence is required

Figure 5.11 presents the different types of evidence required by organisations. Proof of mapping and alignment was the most common evidence required by accreditation programs, where quality assurance agencies had more policy statements as indications of compliancy. The option related to finances was not a popular method of reporting. This may be because the responding organisations are primarily arm’s-length government or member-based organisations which are unlikely to have a funding responsibility. One of those that responded ‘other’ indicated that new and cyclical program reviews verify the use of learning outcomes.
The next set of questions inquired about evidence of student achievements: if and how student success of learning outcomes was being demonstrated to the regulatory agency (see Figure 5.12). In total, over 70% of the 27 respondents indicated that they require, or are in the process of developing policies on, evidence of student achievement. Where all but one of the accreditation agencies currently have policies on student achievement evidence in place, only 25% of the quality assurance agencies have policies in place, though another 40% indicate they are in the process of developing evidence procedures.
Standardized assessments were the most common type of evidence used to demonstrate student achievement (see Figure 5.13). Of those that indicated ‘other’, one stated that institutions must show the use of an assessment methodology adequate for the expected learning outcomes. Another indicated that professional board pass rates were used as indications, and another noted that the national voluntary graduate certification program was used as an indication of student success.
When probed further on their use of standard assessments, only six of the 16 respondents indicated that they require (rather than recommend) the use of standard assessments. Three indicated that they have one standard assessment for all institutions/programs, and two allow institutions/programs to use other standard assessments of their choice (such as assessment of generic skills, literacy, numeracy, etc.). Three of the respondents indicating ‘other’ noted that there was at least one common assessment that all institutions/programs must use. The other was in the process of developing a standard assessment protocol.

5.4 Evaluations of policies/frameworks

Over 50% of respondents indicated that they were in the process of conducting, or had completed, research on their learning outcomes policy (N=27). While this number seems impressive, note that the original sample was 74, and elimination through various questions meant only 32 were eligible for this question, five of which chose not to complete it. Hence, of the 27 responses to this question, eight organisations had completed research. It was primarily
accreditation agencies that had conducted research, and quality assurance agencies that are in the process of conducting evaluations (see Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.14: Evaluation activities by regulatory type

Geographically, the majority of research identified by respondents has taken place in Europe and North America. A possible explanation is that these regions have the longest history of learning outcomes policies and are therefore at a stage where they are ready to investigate outcomes. For example, one survey participant indicated that their policy, developed in 2010, is scheduled for an evaluation in 2018.

When reporting on the types of research activities of those which were currently undertaking or had completed research, most indicated they had conducted two or more types of evaluations. The most common form of formative research examined how well the institutions were progressing through the policy implementation stipulations, and five had conducted interviews seeking feedback on the policies (see Figure 5.15). As noted previously, because the organisations are unlikely to be funding agencies it is possible there is a lack of awareness or interest in the financial implications of learning outcomes initiatives.
Regarding summative research (which evaluates impact and the achievement of goals), nine organisations indicated that they had completed, or were in the process of completing evaluations (see Figure 5.16). The majority of the research focuses on the impact on institutions. Given that most policies/frameworks were clearer in their goals for institutions than for QA organizations (see Figure 5.5, for example), it is not surprising that this is the more common focus of the evaluation research.
Figure 5.16: Types of summative evaluations conducted

The majority of research was focused on the impact of learning outcomes on institutions; most notably in teaching and student learning (Figure 5.17). While the reported impact for organisations was more modest, the benefits were seen in the areas of transparency and regional/international comparability and collaboration.
Examining the impacts compared to the stated long-term policy goals show neither organizational nor institutional goals were achieved except in the area of economic development (see Figure 5.18). These data must be considered with caution because they do not indicate results of specific policy goals and whether or not they were achieved. It reflects only the percentage of agencies that indicated the goal (% of N=29) and the percentage that indicated impact (N=14). They are not necessarily the same agencies. One possibility is that the goals have yet to be realised because long term goals and societal benefits are not always apparent in the early stages of policy introduction.
Figure 5.18: Long-term goals vs. research findings of impact for organisations

Figure 5.19: Long-term goals vs. research findings of impact for the institutions
Because of the limited number of respondents who had conducted an impact analysis of their policies on learning outcomes, the question of impact was broadened out to respondents who had not completed research, inquiring about the perceived benefits of the learning outcomes policies. Figure 5.20 below shows the responses of 22 participants. It shows a considerable number of organisations believe there were impacts on a variety of areas in both institutions, organisations and in areas of labour market and economic importance. Respondents indicated that their perception of the benefits was informed largely by formal feedback from institutions as well as from other research. The apparent perception is that the regulatory organisations have benefited more than the institutions in all areas, with the exception of regional and international compatibility.

Figure 5.20: Perceived impact of the learning outcomes policy

Examining the perceived benefits compared to the stated policy goals we find that, across all categories, the impression is that institutions are not achieving the goals (see Figure 5.21). While this could be considered a failure of most policies, it should be recalled that some of the long-term goals for institutions were likely unattainable, regardless of short term targets. For example,
tying a direct link between learning outcomes and economic development is likely to be impossible. Another possibility is that the goals have yet to be realised because long term goals and societal benefits are not always apparent in the early stages of policy introduction. Lastly, because the results of actual research show improvement in these areas, it is possible that there have been greater impacts than the perceptions suggest.

Figure 5.21: Long-term goals vs. perceived impact in institutions

The data suggest that the organisations perceive the impact on their own organisation to be very successful in achieving their stated long-term goals (see Figure 5.22 below). In all but one category, the benefits attributed to the learning outcomes policies go beyond the intended goals.
The perceptions of benefits of learning outcomes policies compared to the original goals provide insight into the perceptions of results, and suggest there were intended and unintended results. Unintended results are seen in the differences between the number of respondents that had a feature as a target, and those that perceived an impact on it. If there was no intention to impact that specific aspect, then any changes can be considered unintended. For example, 80% believe there was an improvement in teaching while only 20% targeted it. This suggests it was an unintended outcome of the policy for 60% of the respondents.

It is possible that with formal investigations, organisations may be able to better target their policies and frameworks to achieve their goals.

An alternate consideration is that there is a stark difference between what the research shows and what the organisations believe the impact has been. The responses from organisations that had conducted research on their learning outcomes frameworks (question 41) is contrasted with responses from those only had perceived impact (question 43)\(^3\). Below, Figure 5.23 and Figure

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\(^3\) The survey skip logic ensured the two groups did not overlap.
5.24 show comparisons of the research results (N=14) to the perceived benefits (N=22). What emerges is that the research shows that learning outcome framework is having more of an impact in the institutions than is perceived but the impact for the quality assurance agencies themselves is much lower than perceived.

Figure 5.23: Research findings vs. perceived impact in institutions
This chapter has provided an analysis of the responses of 74 higher education regulatory bodies on the topic of their use of learning outcomes policies. The survey respondents provided a good blend of geographical, organisational and regulatory types allowing for some generalisations to be made. Similarly, the data collected provide insight into the breadth and depth of activities occurring, and highlight some of the regional and regulatory type differences.

The data show that over 50% of the responding regulatory agencies have a learning outcomes policy in place, with the numbers growing after 2005. Organisations indicated they had more long- and short-term goals for the institutions than for their own internal purposes. Internally the expectations were focused on transparency and regional/international compatibility and the short-term targets tend to focus on measurement/assessment.

Alternatively, the long-term goals for institutions were largely focused on student learning, institutional improvement and labour market alignment, and the trends in choice of short-term
targets are articulation, implementation and signalling/demonstrating achievement. Considering that one half of the agencies require institutions/programs to develop their own internal learning outcomes, the focus on articulation is understandable. It becomes clear how the two other goals of improvement and labour market alignment are reflected in the choice of curriculum mapping and demonstrating achievement to outside audiences.

Evidence of goal achievement was collected by most agencies. Every accreditation organisation indicated that they collect information on both implementation and student success activities. Fewer quality assurance agencies collect evidence of implementation, and a very small number require evidence of student success. This may reflect the different priorities of the regulatory models, where those quality assurance agencies indicate a focus on policy and procedure, which allows for peer evaluation of student success rather than more formal means.

The data also shows that some research on impact of learning outcomes policies has taken place. Accreditation agencies are more advanced in their research; however, the quality assurance agencies are currently conducting a small number of projects. The results of the research provide a different story on the benefits of learning outcomes policies compared to the general perception from those who have not conducted research, as shown in Figures 5.23 and 5.24. Similarly, there is a marked difference in the overall intended goals compared to the actual research findings (Figures 5.21 and 5.22), which suggests there may be a disconnection between the long term policy goals, short term targets, or how the policies are being implemented. The next chapter will examine the research conducted by the organisations that participated in the survey in order to delve deeper into these policy issues to more fully unpack the question of impact.
Chapter 6

Evaluations of learning outcomes policies

A primary premise of this dissertation research is that there has been limited research conducted on the impact of learning outcomes policies in regulatory activities, and therefore a fair understanding of the true value of such policies is clouded by impressions and surveys of implementation. The importance of evaluations cannot be overstated. As discussed in Chapter 4, both summative and formative evaluations are critical to the policy cycle in that they inform the continued evolution of polices, serving as a check to ensure the goals are being achieved. Previous research into the use of learning outcomes in National Qualifications Frameworks, for example, show that only in certain cases where the policies were narrow and direct, were the polices found effective in meeting their purpose.

The analysis presented in Chapter 5 showed the differences between goals, perceived outcomes and actual outcomes of learning outcomes policies based on a survey of 74 higher education regulatory agencies around the world. An important finding from the survey is that learning outcomes policies are perceived as ineffective. The survey also revealed that while only 8 organisations had conducted some form of evaluation of their learning outcomes framework, the research found that the policies have not been successful in improving a variety of aspects of the higher education landscape.

What the survey did not capture was whether the policies were successful at achieving the intended goals. Therefore, more detailed examination of the research on learning outcomes policy is necessary to understand if the policies are successful in achieving goals and under what conditions. For example, perhaps focusing on measurements through accreditation processes is effective at achieving labour market alignment, but audits focusing on implementation are completely unsuccessful at improving credit transfer. A more nuanced understanding of the overall environment wherein the policies exist is important in order to tease out trends and best practice.
The evaluation component is critical. Evaluation research examines effectiveness (goal achievement) and efficiency (relationship between costs and benefits of program, projects and organisations) adapted to political and organisational environments using broad social science methods (Rossi et al., 2004; Spiel et al., 2013). Program evaluation, on the other hand, is slightly more practical. It is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of policies and programs in order to make judgements about the program, improve program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming (Rossi et al., 2004). It can examine processes or outcomes: be formative or summative.

Of the organisations that participated in the survey, four indicated that they had conducted evaluations and three were able to provide information for analysis. Two of the organisations, the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Latvia’s Foundation Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (AIKNC) provided research reports (Dzelme, nd; Quality Assurance Agency, 2010) and the Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA) from Chile provided an overview of the research through personal email correspondence.

In ‘snowball’ manner, some survey participants shared documentation they felt would be relevant to the research. This uncovered projects by the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) (Gallavara et al., 2008; Hansen et al., 2013). NOQA has representation from QAA’s in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Sweden. The network is not a member of the INQAAHE or CIQG, yet it fits the parameters of a higher education regulatory network/agency32. Because a primary intention of the survey was to uncover research, the discovery of the NOQA research is included as part of the data for evaluation in this chapter.

6.1 Case studies

Thus, this chapter presents the findings of seven research studies of learning outcomes policies to explore the successful and less successful attributes of the initiatives. Each of the studies was conducted by or on behalf of regulatory agencies and is specifically related to, or include commentary on, learning outcomes policies. Each research study is individually presented to

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32 FINHEEC, the Finish quality assurance agency, is an INQAAHE member but did not participate in the survey.
provide a brief overview of the regulatory situation, the research and the findings, and the study is analysed in two ways:

1. Through the structural features of: regulatory model, focus, and level of expectation (as set out in Chapters 2 and 4).
2. Through the policy choices of: the identified goals, actors, audiences and strategy types (as set out in Chapter 2)

The survey discussed in Chapter 5 presented these structural features and policy choices in more detail. As the organisations were responding to a survey, there was the possibility to gain insight into the finer details of their work. In this chapter, the categories are more inclusive in order to comment on broader trends for the purposes of a meta-evaluation. For example, the survey provided nine options for policy goals where this chapter groups the policy goals into five categories.

The chapter does not present a complete picture of the higher education sectors, regulatory arrangements, nor does it fully describe how learning outcomes are integrated in the systems. Rather it presents the results of the research conducted by (or for) the relevant agencies. The detail provided in each case study is based on the information presented in the research documentation.

Because this research is a meta-evaluation of research, supplemental information was not collected. The information presented is only what was included in the research (or through the email correspondence outlining the unpublished research at CINDA). However, for those organisations that participated in the survey, some of background information is supplied from the questionnaires. Because those agencies consented to further correspondence they were provided with the draft case study of their research via email for feedback to ensure accuracy. Feedback was received from CINDA. For the NOQA studies that that did not participate in the survey, the case studies are based exclusively on the information provided in the research evaluations. The agencies were not contacted to confirm further information.

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33 The type of expectation (i.e., competency, learning outcomes, learning objective) is not considered in this evaluation as word choice, use and translation issues make it too complex to base any judgments without examining the actual statements (which is outside the scope of this project).
Following the case studies the results are tabulated in a meta-evaluation to reveal indications of how successful the learning outcomes initiatives were in terms of achieving policy goals in the following section.

6.2 The Foundation Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (AIKNC)


The Foundation Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (AIKNC) is a private member-based association for Latvian institutions. Established in 1994, it regulates undergraduate and graduate degrees wherever they are provided. As part of Europe, the country’s higher education system operates under the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF-LL) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) in compliance with the Bologna Accord (European Commission, 2008). Latvia also has a national qualifications framework.

AIKNC structural features

The AIKNC is responsible for regulating undergraduate and graduate degrees, and does so through quality assurance mechanisms. The agency adopted a policy for learning outcomes in 2010 as an addition to the existing measures. Based on this policy, institutions are currently in the process of establishing internal learning outcomes to reflect the statements set out by the qualifications framework. The policy goals are focused on aspects of system level coordination and accountability; specifically aimed to improve transparency, credit transfer, system design and labour market alignment. A primary activity is linking the program standards and institutional learning outcomes with the NQF and EQF-LL. Hence, the institutions are articulating and implementing learning outcomes. The institutions must show they are implementing learning outcomes through policy statements and provide information on program initiatives. Currently, evidence of student achievement is not required, but a policy is under development.
Table 6.1 below presents the structural features of the Latvian case (based on the framework developed in Chapter 2). Features that were identified in the research are highlighted.

Table 6.1: AIKNC – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Regulation</th>
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<th>Level of Expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Credential</td>
<td>International/regional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance (Audits)</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>National/jurisdictional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
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<td>Discipline</td>
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<td>Program</td>
<td>Student (in course)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Generic Skills</td>
<td>Student (across courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

AIKNC research methodology

In 2014 AIKNC reported on the state of their learning outcomes activities as part of their contribution to a report on quality assurance in VET funded by the German-based non-profit organisation Bertelsmann Stiftung. The Latvian report contributed information on the structure of quality assurance and the relationship between vocational and higher education sectors. The research findings were based on interviews and data collected from various national databases.

AIKNC findings

Given the early stage of introduction of the learning outcomes policies, the research is formative rather than summative. However, insights are emerging. Overall sentiments are that learning outcomes should continue to be developed and adopted, but that the process of developing learning outcomes needs to work with trades, professional bodies, unions, etc. to make the learning outcomes useful indications of competence. Regarding implementation, there seems to be a lack of cohesion between the various frameworks (which govern higher education and vocational education and training (VET) separately). It is suggested that the learning outcomes between the two systems need to be coordinated and better aligned in order to improve system design and credit transfer. For example, VET uses credit hours where higher education is

working with learning outcomes. The findings suggest the learning outcomes in higher education should be better linked to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). A similar issue noted was the lack of connections with the secondary education system.

Table 6.2 below maps these policy choices and indicates where the research results have shown positive impact (green shade and bold font), negative impact (red shade and white font) and inconclusive or mixed impact (yellow shade and standard font). Attributes in grey font were not addressed. (Note that AIKNC did not have any features that were positivity impacted).

Table 6.2: AIKNC – Impact on Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
<th>Strategy type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Measurement</td>
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<tr>
<td>System design and credit transfer</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agencies/ Accreditation</td>
<td>Program (curriculum</td>
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<td>development)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour market alignment and economic</td>
<td>National Governments</td>
<td>Institution</td>
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<td>International coordination (and</td>
<td>International/regional Government or Non-</td>
<td>System level</td>
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<td>comparison)</td>
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Note: Positive impact = green shade, bold black font; Negative impact = red shade, white font; Inconclusive or mixed impact = yellow shade, standard font. Attributes not addressed = grey font

Overall, the research findings note that learning outcomes are still in the early stages of implementation and therefore the study did not discuss impact. However, the formative research suggests that using learning outcomes to better link the various types of credentials, and
developing the learning outcomes in collaboration with other actors is important for them to be useful.

6.3 Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA)

*Personal correspondence, 2015*

Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (Inter-University Development Center) (CINDA) is an international network of Spanish speaking universities with members across Latin America and Europe. Established in 1975 the organisation regulates its voluntary members through accreditation of undergraduate and graduate education providers. Some of their members (in Europe) operate under the EQF-LL and EHEA, but the majority of the member institutions reside in Latin America where there is no regional qualifications framework.

*CINDA structural features*

CINDA introduced the concept of learning outcomes as part of the accreditation process and is still developing the policy/framework. Member institutions are required to internally establish learning outcomes based on disciplinary developments and the labour market. The intention of including learning outcomes in the accreditation framework was to support students, public, faculty members, as well as enhance course design and curriculum development, and to support institutional accountability. The goal was to improve transparency, and regional and international compatibility and comparison (for the agency), and the institutional goals were to improve student learning, teaching, credit transfer and articulation.

Institutions must demonstrate that they are implementing learning outcomes through policy statements and mapping. Institutions are required to demonstrate student achievement through reporting the results of various standard assessments (determined by the institutions), and through reporting graduate requirements. See Table 6.3 below for details.
Table 6.3: CINDA – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Regulation</th>
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<th>Level of Expectation</th>
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<td>Accountability</td>
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</table>

Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

CINDA research methodology

CINDA has not produced specific research on learning outcomes policies, but has completed a variety of educational research projects on the topics of management, quality assurance, teaching and learning. The findings presented here are based on email correspondence with a senior staff member drawing on the findings from their research.

As part of their research on accreditation activities, CINDA established expected learning outcomes (or graduate profiles) as the framework for review, included criteria that profiles had to meet, and asked institutions to provide evidence of the mechanisms they had in place to ensure that the learning outcomes had in fact been reached. An evaluation of the use of learning outcomes in the accreditation process is currently underway.

CINDA findings

Various research studies provided evidence that faculty members found significant increases in student learning. It was also found that exit examinations as evidence of student achievement may not be useful and, in fact, may interfere with responsible teaching and learning. CINDA’s internal research sought to understand how to employ learning outcomes in accreditation in a meaningful way “We tried to find some appropriate way to measure valued added by the teaching and learning process, but we're not able to find anything that would be feasible from an external review point of view” (personal correspondence). See Table 6.4 for an overview of the findings.
### Table 6.4: CINDA – Impact on Policy Choices

<table>
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<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
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#### 6.4 United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency (QAA):

**“Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: Final report”, 2010**

The United Kingdom’s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education was established in 1997 as an arm’s-length government body responsible for higher education in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Responsible for all levels of new and existing credentials in both public and private institutions, the QAA operates through quality assurance measures (audits/assessments)
QAA structural features

As part of Europe, the country’s higher education system operates under the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF-LL) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) in compliance with the Bologna Accord (European Commission, 2008).

The UK has one of the longest histories of using learning outcomes: in 1997, the QAA developed the Academic Infrastructure for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This established a Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) across the countries, and at the same time began to establish Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) developed by topic experts, and guidelines of how programs are expected to link the statements to curriculum through Program Standards (PS).

According to the survey results, learning outcomes were introduced with a wide range of expectations including supporting students, faculty members in course design or teaching, program curriculum development as well as supporting the institutional with internal and external accountability. QAA’s institutions must demonstrate that they are implementing learning outcomes through policy statements and mapping initiatives, and the QAA requires evidence of student achievement (though not through standard assessments).

QAA research methodology

An evaluation of the QAA framework was initiated in 2009-2010, 11 years after the implementation of the Academic Infrastructure. The research was a formal summative evaluation seeking to reflect on the ‘use, impact and effectiveness’ of the framework to determine if the policy had “met its original expectations, whether it remained relevant and fit for purpose and whether it is sufficiently flexible to accommodate future developments” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 2). The report described the three parallel learning outcomes policies in place: one for the broad qualifications, one for subject, and one for program-specific expectations. The methodology included document analysis, circulating a discussion paper and requesting formal

35 Scotland has a separate qualifications framework that was developed prior to Bologna.
feedback from stakeholders, and through hosted roundtable discussions and formal discussions with higher education networks.

6.4.1 Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

**QAA FHEQ structural features**

The UK’s Frameworks for higher education qualifications cover degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards granted by a higher education provider. There are two qualifications frameworks that present credential level competency statements in the UK: one for Scotland and one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The research found the frameworks have achieved a clarification of the structure and nomenclature of awards that has been generally adopted by all higher education providers in the UK (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010). The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has been particularly successful in integrating all levels of school to post-secondary education, which has supported its use, high profile, and wide acceptance. See Table 6.5 below for details of the structural elements of the FHEQ.

Table 6.5: QAA FHEQ – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

**QAA FHEQ findings**

The research on the FHEQ found that there was less success in integrating the framework and seeing improvement in the relationship between vocational qualifications and the use of credit transfer. The report noted another challenge was in implementing the learning outcomes across all types of higher education providers (including private), which has hindered the usefulness of the framework.
Having different frameworks and learning outcomes for Scotland and for England, Wales and Northern Ireland has complicated coordination and, more broadly, it was found that the framework has not been a useful tool for improving international coordination: “It was considered that the existence of two frameworks for higher education qualifications – one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and one for Scotland – is potentially confusing and makes working across country boundaries more difficult” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 6). Table 6.6 below proves an analysis of the research findings.

Table 6.6: QAA FHEC – Impact on Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Goals</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
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</tr>
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<td>International coordination (and comparison)</td>
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6.4.2 Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS)

QAA SBS structural features

Alongside the FHEQ, the QAA also established Subject Benchmark Statements which set out expectations about awards in a range of subject areas. “They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected in terms of the abilities and skills which illustrate understanding of and competence in the subject” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 7). See Table 6.7 for an overview of the structural features.

Table 6.7: QAA SBS – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Generic Skills</td>
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Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

QAA SBS findings

The Subject Benchmark Statements were found useful within the academic/subject communities (including professional bodies), and valuable in linking the subjects to the broader FHEQ. The level at which they are focused supports institutional autonomy and flexibility, which found to be appreciated by stakeholders, and which was found to support broad comparability across providers.

Other findings of the research note the subject benchmark statements were not particularly useful when working with those outside of the subject or in interdisciplinary issues. Similarly, because they are only set out at the honours degree level credential they were not found to be useful in coordinating the sectors. Furthermore, “The evaluation demonstrated that where a programme or award was accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body, there could sometimes be a tension between the different requirements (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 7). Table 6.8 below outlines the impact on the policy choices of the QAA SBS.
Table 6.8: QAA SBS – Impact on Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Goals</th>
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6.4.3 Program Specific Statements (PS)

QAA PS structural features

The Program Specific Statements are developed by each program with the purpose of supporting transparency for students and employers:

The original intention of the programme specification had been to help provide prospective students with more information about the courses they were interested in studying, and information for employers about what a potential applicant had studied. The evaluation found that in many cases programme specifications were not considered to be the most effective way for providing information for students or for employers. Many who contributed to the evaluation thought that the information prospective
students required to inform choice was available in other more appropriate forms (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 7)

Table 6.9 below shows the structural features of the Program Statements Standards framework.

Table 6.9: QAA PS – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
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QAA PS findings

The research found the PS supported the quality assurance processes as they were useful in demonstrating the link the curriculum with the broader framework. Ultimately, however, “there was a minority view that if programme specifications were not intended to be the vehicle for providing public information then they should be abandoned” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 7). See Table 6.10 below for an overview of the research findings on the QAA PS policy.
Table 6.10: QAA PS – Impact on Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Teaching and learning</td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Public/employers</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional improvement/Quality</td>
<td>Discipline associations</td>
<td>Faculty (course design)</td>
<td>Measurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System design</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agencies/ Accreditation bodies</td>
<td>Program (curriculum development)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour market alignment and economic development</td>
<td>National Governments</td>
<td>Institution (accountability)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International coordination (and comparison)</td>
<td>International/regional Government or Non-Governmental Organisations</td>
<td>System level (coordination and accountability)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Positive impact = green shade, bold black font; Negative impact = red shade, white font; Inconclusive or mixed impact = yellow shade, standard font. Attributes not addressed = grey font.

Overall, the research on the UK’s QAA framework including credential, subject and program learning outcomes indicates that each level of learning outcome framework had different strengths and weaknesses. The broad credential level statements were successful in developing a framework for standards and quality with common vocabulary across the nations, but this approach was unsuccessful in improving system level and international coordination. The subject benchmark statements were generally successful and found useful within the disciplinary field. Finally, the program statements were found to benefit programs and institutions in their quality assurance activities, but the primary goals of “transparency for students and employers” was not achieved and therefore the value of the policy was questioned. The research notes “Many who contributed to the (PS) evaluation thought that the information students required to inform choice was available in other more appropriate forms” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010: 10).
6.5 Nordic Quality Assurance Network

Background

The Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) is a network of quality assurance agencies across the five Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. It is “a forum for information dissemination, exchanging experiences and pursuing projects of mutual interest. The main objective of the organisation is to create a common understanding of different Nordic viewpoints on issues related to higher education quality assurance”\(^{36}\). The network is not an INQAAHE or CIQG member, therefore did not participate in the survey. Four of the NOQA agencies are INQAAHE members (ACE Denmark, The Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Iceland), The Finnish Higher Education Council (FINHEEC), and The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV))\(^{37}\) and The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), however, none participated in the study.

Two research reports funded by NOQA were uncovered following correspondence with other survey participants. The information presented below is based exclusively on the information contained within the two reports. The two reports are reviewed separately as the finding offer different insights, and also show the policy ‘learning’ that occurred following the first study. However, because there was later, summative research conducted on these same countries, the findings of the research are considered and described, but not included for analysis.

The NOQA research presents country reports on the use of learning outcomes policies in each country, and each country can have multiple regulatory agencies. Therefore the research reflects the broader quality assurance landscape of each country, rather than the experience of independent regulatory agencies.

\(^{36}\) http://www.nokut.no/en/noqa/

\(^{37}\) The other two NOQA agencies are The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Iceland) and The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA).

As part of Europe and being under the umbrella of Bologna and the EQF, each of the countries were at different stages of NQF and other learning outcomes’ policy maturation. In 2007 NOQA, with some funding from the European Commission, undertook a joint study of learning outcomes in quality assurance activities in order to expand the network’s knowledge and understanding of the use and purpose of learning outcomes in member countries (Gallavara et al., 2008). the working title of the project was: “How learning outcomes (National and European Qualification Framework) are or may be an important basis for evaluation criteria for study programmes”.

NOQA 2008 research methodology

The 2008 project was concerned with how evaluations of learning outcomes could support quality assurance and, moreover, what indicators would be useful. The research considered the introduction, purpose, use and measurement of learning outcomes in institutions in quality assurance activities. Each country’s quality assurance agency (and two from Denmark) was represented by one individual, making up the 7 person project team. The participating organisations surveyed three institutions within their jurisdictions to illuminate trends in how learning outcomes were being used. The institutions were asked to answer a set of questions in order to obtain comparable material. All agencies used a questionnaire to collect the information. In addition, the Danish EVA also carried out telephone interviews (Gallavara et al., 2008: 7). The work established a baseline understanding of activities, commented on definitions and concepts of learning outcomes and evaluation/measurement techniques and the goals of learning outcomes in each country in general.

NOQA 2008 findings

Because the learning outcomes policies were in an early phase, the research was largely formative and described how learning outcomes were being conceptualised articulated and

38 ACE Denmark, The Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Iceland), The Finnish Higher Education Council (FINHEEC), The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV), and The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)
introduced. Results showed the countries were at various stages, but all were developing and/or incorporating their NQF’s and working towards understanding how evaluations of learning outcomes could be approached. The institutions had the expectation that learning outcomes were going to be useful in teaching and learning and were looking forward to linking programming with the National and European Qualifications Frameworks.

The measurement/evaluation of learning outcomes was a component of the report that was addressed by two of the countries. The findings were, again, related to the status of activities and experience (formative evaluations) rather than providing summative judgements. For example, Denmark had piloted criteria for the use of learning outcomes in accreditation schemes and was identifying the pitfalls of both grades and examinations as indications of student achievement. In Norway, the use of graduate and employer surveys and interviews were being considered as an indication of student competence as part of the accreditation process.

As formative research, the findings were presented as ‘considerations’ and ‘reflections’. A primary finding of the work was the challenges of finding fair and appropriate evaluations and assessments of learning outcomes for use in internal and external regulation. It was suggested that institutions subjected to quality assurance audits will be required to find appropriate student evaluations and also to ensure the auditors have experience with learning outcomes. The authors posit that “it does not seem possible or plausible for audits to evaluate whether a learning outcome complies with a national qualifications framework, or whether a course or a study program is properly designed to fulfil the learning outcomes” (Gallavara et al., 2008: 42). Instead, the audit process assesses if the institutions have the right tools and how to work to improve them.

For those agencies that conduct quality assurance audits and/or accreditation there were three main issues. The first was related to the need for a common understanding of terms and meanings. The second related to assessment criteria and the use of learning outcomes as guides rather than rules. The third issue related to accreditation and the importance of evaluations indicating benchmarks of actual achievement are vital, as is the need to find valid and reliable tools to demonstrate, assess and/or measure learning outcomes.
Overall the 2008 report provided a benchmark of learning outcomes initiatives and put the countries on a path to focus on the implementation of NQF’s, as well as incorporating learning outcomes into regulation. The research commented on the implications of learning outcomes within audits (quality assurance), evaluation (accountability) and accreditation. A primary concern moving forward was on the evaluation of learning outcomes.


Following on the foundational research of 2008, four of the participating nations (Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden) came together again in 2012 to review the state of learning outcomes. The research notes: “It has been argued that the strong emphasis on learning outcomes in the Bologna process is due to the fact that learning outcomes represent both a practical device and a methodological approach to improve the competitiveness, transparency, recognition and mobility of European education” (Hansen et al., 2013: 6). The research explored in detail how learning outcomes are applied in external quality assurance in the Nordic countries, with an emphasis on the collection, assessment and use of data.

NOQA 2013 research methodology

The 2013 NOQA report did not provide an explicit research methodology. The structure, however, suggests that similar to the previous study, each of the countries was responsible for providing information on their own jurisdiction. As before, each country was represented by one or more QA agencies, and those individuals authored the report. Thus is it possible to infer that authors were conducting reviews of their own agency practices and that the findings are based on author perceptions.

The project had two goals: The first was to conduct formative research to see how learning outcomes are being collected, assessed and how data are being used. The second goal was to use summative research to determine strengths and limitations in how learning outcomes are being applied in external quality assurance. Because each of the countries were presented as independent case studies, and because they each had different results, the following sections
reviews their findings separately before commenting on the overall findings of the research study.

6.5.1 NOQA Denmark

*NOQA Denmark structural features*

Denmark has had a qualifications framework for higher education since 2003, though it was the 2007 revision that included statements on competence and learning outcomes. Higher education regulation in Denmark operates through an accreditation scheme in order to obtain government funding. Previously two bodies for vocational and higher education regulations operated separately, but at the time of the study were in the process of integrating and establishing a new framework to approve new and existing programs across the sectors. Under this new framework institutions are the unit of analysis, where previously, accreditation occurred at the programs level. The new format is heavily based on learning outcomes: 6 of the 10 requirements for new programs are related to learning outcomes, and learning outcomes are the basis for 6 out of 17 indicators for existing programs. For example, there are rigorous assessments of learning outcome implementation through mapping and alignment, and student achievement through the complex use of standard evaluations and comparative analysis at the program level. The evaluations of the requirements are taken seriously and in some cases 25% of applicants fail the learning outcomes component.

A major goal of introducing learning outcomes was to support labour market alignment; hence, programs must track learning outcome alignment from labour market to courses, and vice-versa. Demarks QAA also requires proof of student achievement as part of their accreditation process. They have assessments by teacher and external examiners who provide information on their grading scheme. Once that is approved they then look to see how many have received a passing grade. Table 6.11 below reviews Denmark’s regulatory landscape.
Table 6.11: NOQA Denmark – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Regulation</th>
<th>Focus of Expectation</th>
<th>Level of Expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Credential</td>
<td>International/regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance (Audits)</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>National/jurisdictional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Program</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Student (in course)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generic Skills</td>
<td>Student (across courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

**NOQA Denmark findings**

Denmark’s regulatory agencies conducted research on the strengths and limitations of learning outcomes and presented the finding in four categories. The first area it discussed was the value of learning outcomes as an indication of program quality. The researchers found that implementation and mapping are useful for accreditation purposes, but are not always easy for the institutions to use appropriately. This creates a misalignment between expectations of the accreditation agencies and those of the institutions.

The second area discussed in Denmark’s evaluation related to the use of learning outcomes as a transparency tool. Learning outcomes were found useful for students both as a signal of what they should expect from their program, and also in protecting students, as the accreditation process has identified programs that are not meeting standards. Also, “the method has succeeded in identifying programmes where the learning outcomes were not sufficiently supported by the structure and content of the programme or by sufficient resources at the institution” (Hansen et al., 2013: 21).

Findings on the value of learning outcomes as a tool for employers and the labour market were less positive, suggesting that there were significant challenges in mapping programs to the labour market. This led to the suggestion that there should be more employer engagement in the assignment and assessment of required learning outcomes.

The third area of findings focused on the issue of breadth and depth of learning outcomes, and the relationship between the value for comparative and system design issues (when generic) and the greater usefulness to institutions when the learning outcomes are more specific. The balance
between the two opposite ends of the continuum speaks to the questions of the ultimate purpose of the policy:

If the learning outcomes are too general one could ask how they can serve as a useful tool for the institutions. Thus, there is a risk that the institutions will write the learning outcomes for the purpose of external quality assurance solely and not use them in their daily work. It is not possible to say whether this is the case today, but further investigation in this matter could be done to assess how learning outcomes works (Hansen et al., 2013: 22).

Finally, the fourth key finding for Denmark was in the use of data on student achievement in the accreditation process. The system they have developed is a sophisticated means to ascertain the competencies of students, but the issue is where to draw the pass line and how to fairly enact that standard across the country. See Table 6.12 for a review of the research findings.
6.5.2 NOQA Finland

**NOQA Finland structural features**

Some higher education in Finland is regulated the Finnish Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) where other institutions are independent and conduct internal audits. Finland has not yet developed a qualifications framework, but does have general statements of broad learning outcomes. As of 2013 the nation had not adopted the HE-EHEA or EQF, but some institutions had started to incorporate the frameworks for their own purposes. Because there is no clear policy for learning outcomes, explicit goals and expectations are not established. See Table 6.13 below for a review of the structural features.
Table 6.13: NOQA Finland – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Regulation</th>
<th>Focus of Expectation</th>
<th>Level of Expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Credential</td>
<td>International/regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance (Audits)</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>National/jurisdictional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Generic Skills</td>
<td>Student (in course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student (across courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

NOQA Finland findings

The primary finding on the use of learning outcomes in Finland is that it was difficult to evaluate the function of learning outcomes because they are not a compulsory component of the audit framework: “In other words, no evaluative judgements can really be made of the functioning of the FINHEEC model in relation to learning outcomes, because of the focus of the model being elsewhere” (Hansen et al., 2013: 24). Essentially, institutions are expected to articulate learning outcomes, but there is no expectation that they will be implemented in the institutions, and some have chosen not to.

Similarly, as an audit process, auditors are able to choose what features to examine, and may not choose to look at learning outcomes. When learning outcomes were examined, however, significant differences in the quality of actual learning outcomes statements were found. The findings note that the if the auditors were more given clear expectations of what to expect of the institutional learning outcomes statements and activities it might be helpful providing fair evaluations.

The results of the Finish review find that learning outcomes are not particularly well suited to the audit model: “it is quite clear that the FINHEEC audit model 2012-2017, with its current broad focus, is not suited for putting a much stronger emphasis on learning outcomes” (Hansen et al., 2013: 25). Nonetheless, it is suggested that learning outcomes could be more deeply integrated into the audit model and auditors could be provided with training in implementation issues in order to more deeply engage. See Table 6.14 for an analysis of the policy.
Table 6.14: NOQA Finland – Impact on Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Goals</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
<th>Strategy type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning</td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Public/employers</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional improvement/Quality</td>
<td>Discipline associations</td>
<td>Faculty (course design)</td>
<td>Measurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System design</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agencies/ Accreditation bodies</td>
<td>Program (curriculum development)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour market alignment and economic development</td>
<td>National Governments</td>
<td>Institution (accountability)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International coordination (and comparison)</td>
<td>International/regional Government or Non-Governmental Organisations</td>
<td>System level (coordination and accountability)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Positive impact = green shade, bold black font; Negative impact = red shade, white font; Inconclusive or mixed impact = yellow shade, standard font. Attributes not addressed = grey font

6.5.3 NOQA Norway

NOQA Norway structural features

Norway has two higher education regulatory systems: the Norway Quality Assurance and the Norway Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). NOKUT (which is the primary agency discussed in this evaluation) is responsible for both colleges and universities, and performs quality audits of some programs and accreditation of others (depending on if the institution is self-accredited). The nation developed an NQF with related learning outcomes in 2011 that is intended for use as a transparency tool for communication and understanding for the labour market and for international comparison. Institutions are required to implement the NQF as a way to support system design through the development of program curriculum.
When conducting audits, NOKUT evaluates how well institutions are using self-developed learning outcomes. At the time of the 2013 report only a small number of audits had incorporated learning outcomes. When conducting accreditation of new programs the learning outcomes must be established by subject level and mapped throughout the curriculum to the NQF and must also demonstrate their relevance to the labour market. 5 of 8 accreditation criteria are learning outcomes-related. See Table 6.15 for a review of the Norwegian structural features.

Table 6.15: NOQA Norway – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Regulation</th>
<th>Focus of Expectation</th>
<th>Level of Expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Credential</td>
<td>International/Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance (audits)</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>National/Jurisdictional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Program</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Student (in course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generic Skills</td>
<td>Student (across courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

**NOQA Norway findings**

The research found that learning outcomes are helpful in determining common ground within the subject matters and are starting to improve the accreditation processes because they provide a benchmark for peer-reviewers. Research also found that failure to provide clear learning outcomes was the primary reason programs were rejected, leading to the finding that support and guidelines for writing learning outcomes is important to provide. The second stage, when curriculum mapping is externally examined, was also found problematic. Alignment challenges were present in all directions: from the course to the program or the program to the NQF. Both of these articulation and implementation issues were mediated when reviewers provided programs with detailed feedback.

An important finding from the Norwegian study was that employers and labour market representative are not being engaged in the development of learning outcomes, and for that reason there is concern with the value of the policy as a tool for the labour market: “the question is if the learning outcomes descriptors do communicate well enough with the labour market. In some cases the learning outcomes descriptors could be transparent for the HEI, but not clearly expressed for the labour market” (Hansen et al., 2013: 32).
Overall, findings from the study state that with learning outcomes ‘the experts have found that the designs of the study programmes are more thoroughly worked through and of better consistency and quality than under the former regulation” (Hansen et al., 2013: 31). See Table 6.16 for a review of the Norwegian case study findings.

Table 6.16: NOQA Norway – Impact of Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Goals</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning</td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Public/employers</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional improvement/Quality</td>
<td>Discipline associations</td>
<td>Faculty (course design)</td>
<td>Measurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System design (credit transfer)</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agencies/ Accreditation bodies</td>
<td>Program (curriculum development)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour market alignment and economic development</td>
<td>National Governments</td>
<td>Institution (accountability)</td>
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<tr>
<td>International coordination (and comparison)</td>
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</tbody>
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6.5.4 NOQA Sweden

**NOQA Sweden structural features**

In 2007 Sweden established a National Qualifications Ordinance with established learning outcomes. Swedish higher education operates through what can be described as an accountability model, as there are expectations set by government, but institutions do not have to comply in
order to grant qualifications. Instead, learning outcomes are part of the seven primary features programs are evaluated on, but are not an explicit component.

The goal of the Ordinance is to make sure the programs provide opportunities for students to attain the learning outcomes. Therefore, the evaluations include student achievement as a primary component of success. For example, both assessment materials and student work are considered, as are alumni questionnaires, student experience interviews, and teaching quality is given prominence. “The review focuses exclusively on the learning outcomes with regard to (...) the student’s actual achievement” (Hansen et al., 2013: 34). See Table 6.17 below for a review of the structural features of the Swedish QA system.

Table 6.17: NOQA Sweden – Overview of Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Regulation</th>
<th>Focus of Expectation</th>
<th>Level of Expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Student (in course)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Generic Skills</td>
<td>Student (across courses)</td>
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Note: Attributes in grey shade, bold black font

**NOQA Sweden findings**

It was found that, despite being a simple concept, it is methodologically very challenging to assess student achievement of the NQF in a sound and reliable way. The two primary tools for assessing achievement are through the evaluation of student work and by reviewing the institutional self-evaluations (alumni questionnaires and student experience interviews are less prominent). The research found there were reliability issues due to the small sample of work provided, and subjective opinions of the evaluators, and the realistic question of how one example of work can indicate successful achievement of learning outcomes. Ultimately, the findings report “the qualification descriptors were not really designed to be used in an evaluation of achievement of outcomes. The Authority has now gained valuable experience on the ones that are evaluable and which ones are not” (Hansen et al., 2013: 37).
Similarly, in the self-evaluation, the institutions are not supposed to demonstrate how they are engaging with the administrative issues of learning outcomes, but rather how well the students are achieving the learning outcomes. When considering the options, the research noted that finding the right demonstration tools was extremely difficult, and the extreme expense of individual student assessments.

Findings suggest that while the professional programs were better able to demonstrate student success than the general programs there are considerable methodological difficulties in finding both reliable and valid indications. Furthermore, there were challenges of working at the program level when students transfer in and out of programs, raising questions of who is ultimately responsible for the entire student. The program? The institution? When collecting data on student achievement, and being judged on it, this is an important issue: “the course of study within a main field of study cannot on its own be supposed to account for strengths or weaknesses with regard to all of the learning outcomes tied to a qualification” (Hansen et al., 2013: 37). Table 6.18 below presents the impact findings of the Swedish case.
### Table 6.18: NOQA Sweden – Impact of Policy Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
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### 6.6 Summary

The nine case studies evaluating the use of learning outcomes policies provided useful insights into trends in implementation and impact. Overall findings were positive about the impact learning outcomes have had, and suggest the participating countries and agencies are still hopeful about the possibilities. It was found that learning outcomes have provided common language and clear standards for evaluation (when used in accreditation or accountability). In those cases, the incorporation of learning outcomes has been a useful tool to assess the delivery of the program, not just the structure of the program.

A significant finding was that those countries that conduct audits found learning outcomes were challenging to integrate into the system, but the institutions internal processes were finding them...
useful. Findings suggest that those using a learning outcomes framework for audit purposes need to think carefully about what purpose it serves. It is noted:

If an external quality assurance approach focuses on the framework of learning outcomes rather than on the processes that the framework is supposed to clarify and support and the criteria used concern form rather than content, then the approach has in effect more the character of an evaluation of the implementation of the framework than of an evaluation of the quality of education (Hansen et al., 2013: 43).

Overall the research found that assessment of student learning outcomes is extremely difficult, both in quality assurance audits and in accreditation and accountability assessments. Yet, despite the challenges and costs, they seem to be useful in terms of identifying programs of low quality, as well as enhancing the use and knowledge of learning outcomes.

While intended to be a tool for students and employers, the learning outcomes have not been used in that manner. It was recommended that employers and labour market become much more involved in the development of learning outcomes and in the program evaluations in order for them to serve that purpose. Another issue was related to the NQF’s relationship with the program learning outcomes, and the challenges of alignment. This provoked two issues: unnecessary standardisation when used too rigidly, and making the program learning outcomes so generic they are not useful.

This section of the chapter has analysed the findings of research conducted on learning outcomes policies and frameworks in higher education regulatory schemes. The research was conducted by four different agencies representing different stakeholder types, at different points of maturing in using learning outcomes, and had a variety of findings that suggest where learning outcomes are more or less successful. Each research report was systematically reviewed for indications of the type of regulation in place the focus and level of the expectations, and the impact they have had on stated goals, stakeholders, audience and strategy type.

The findings of the research on learning outcomes policies presented here as case studies have shown the range of activities and issues within distinct policy environments and provided
information on the strengths and weaknesses of particular policy choices. In particular the findings of the evaluations present the qualitative narrative provided by the research cases to uncover perceptions of why policies are succeeding or failing, specifically noting challenges the policy choices and implementation, the ability to determine precise and fair measures of student achievement and, most significantly, insight into the application and abilities policies by the different regulatory types. The next chapter will synthesize these findings in a meta-analysis in order to uncover trends and patterns in the impact of learning outcomes policies.
Chapter 7
Impact of learning outcomes policies

This chapter presents comparative information and trends on the impact of learning outcomes policies. In chapter 6, policy evaluations conducted by four quality assurance organisations reporting on policies in seven different countries were analysed for positive, neutral or negative implications. In this chapter, nine of those research evaluations (‘cases’) are considered through a meta-evaluation:

1. Foundation Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (AIKNC),
2. The Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA),
3. QAA credential level (QAA FHEQ)
4. QAA subject-based standards (QAA SBS)
5. QAA program standards statements (QAA PS)
6. NOQA Denmark
7. NOQA Finland
8. NOQA Norway
9. NOQA Sweden

A meta-evaluation is a process by which findings from existing evaluations are pooled (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Rossi et al., 2004). Here, the meta-evaluation is applied to the case study findings in order to distil common patterns of impact based on the type of implications (positive, neutral/undetermined or negative). The results are presented using descriptive statistics. With a small population of cases using inferential statistics to extrapolate correlations or causality is generally unwise. However, where it was occasionally possible and appropriate to run an analysis on the data, the results are presented in order to provide additional insight.

The first section of this chapter establishes the characteristics of the cases, noting the research method, organisational structure and policy choices. The second section examines the influence of structural elements on the success of learning outcomes policies, showing what elements supported greater or fewer instances of positive, neutral or negative implications. The third section presents the impact on specific policy targets, as well as the relative success of policies
that have that policy target. It shows, for example, that when disciplines were an ‘involved actor’ there were more positive implications across a range of factors. The results of the analysis demonstrate the wide range of activities and the relatively neutral impact of learning outcomes policies.

7.1 Characteristics of case studies

A review of the research cases presented in Chapter 6 finds a wide range of organisational and policy features (see Table 7.1 below). It shows the number of cases that discussed the implications associated with each factor. Note that the factors within each column are not mutually exclusive, as one case may have identified policy implications in a number of factors. The characteristics are divided into two sections: structural features and policy choices. The structural features are fixed organisational factors. The policy choices are the targets and are the areas where it is possible to evaluate success.

There are some characteristics that may have influence on the findings, but are not possible to include as factors for analysis. For example, geographically, eight of the nine cases are from Europe and therefore these findings may be representative of regional rather than global trends. Furthermore, most of the policies have existed for less than 10 years (the exception being QAA which has had policies in place since 1997), and it is difficult to ascertain policy implications and impacts of educational policies as change is often invisible, incremental, and slow (Kis, 2005: 26).
Table 7.1: Characteristics of research cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Features</th>
<th>Policy Choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level of Expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Research</strong></td>
<td><strong>Type of Regulation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative</td>
<td>3 Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summative</td>
<td>6 Quality Assurance (Audits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>3 Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>4 Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>5 Student (in course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic Skills</td>
<td>2 Student (across courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three of the research evaluations were formative and six were summative. While literature suggests summative research provides better insight into impact, formative research can provide valuable information particularly when policies have not matured (Sursock, 2011). The original intention of this dissertation research was to examine summative research in order to comment on impact. However, given the small number of research evaluation cases available for analysis the inclusion of formative research was considered. The results of a Chi-square Test of Independence showed no statistical difference (p > 0.05) in the type of implications found by the two types of research conducted, therefore, all cases nine cases are included for analysis.

Of the nine research evaluations, six examined policies from agencies that conduct quality assurance audits, three that operated accreditation activities, and one that had principles of an accountability scheme. The majority of frameworks worked with credential-level expectations, and five focused on the program level. These foci are reflected in the level of expectation targeted, where six focused on learning outcomes at the national/jurisdictional level and eight worked on learning outcomes at the program level. The goals of the policies varied, though a third aimed to support ‘institutional improvement/quality’.

As the research was conducted by regulatory agencies on their own policies it is understandable that eight studies discussed the impact on quality assurance as an actor. The one case that did not discuss the factor was the QAA PS which is a program-level learning outcomes policy (though embedded in a broader policy). The range of target audiences demonstrates the variety of ways learning outcomes are intended to support success. Also shown is that the majority of research has been conducted on policies that have worked to articulate and implement learning outcomes rather than measure them.

In Chapter 2 the range of possible goals, strategies and policy choices found in the learning outcomes literature was discussed. The literature presented the possible aspects from across all perspectives (international organisations, governments, institutions, etc.) for numerous purposes, and yet nearly all of the factors were addressed in the nine quality assurance case studies. This

39 The only element found in the literature that is not present in the policies evaluated and included in this analysis is ‘sectors’ – such that no policy considered humanities, social science, physical science, etc. as a focus of the policy.
suggests that, within the sample of research cases, there was no trend in what quality assurance policies are intending to do or how they are doing it.

### 7.2 Impact of learning outcomes policies

Trying to understand if the policies were successful at achieving the impact they intended, this section first examines the overall success of each policy. The ‘success’ of policies is considered through the relative number of positive, neutral and negative implications. The section then moves on to observe if, and how, each specific factor was impacted by learning outcomes policies and the relative success of policies containing that factor.

Figure 7.1 below shows the implications of learning outcomes policies in each research case. Of the nine cases, QAA SBS and NOQA Denmark had more positive implications where AINKC, NOQA Finland and NOQA Sweden had neutral impact on over half of their targets. None of the research cases had more negative implications than positive or neutral. Summed across all cases, ‘neutral or undetermined’ was the most frequent result of the policy evaluations (n=35).
The (N) associated with each case represents the number of policy targets evaluated in the research case ranging from 6-18. A correlational analysis was used to examine the relationship between the number of targets and the number of positive, neutral and negative implications. The results indicate a positive but weak correlation between the number of targets and number of positive implications (Spearman’s Rho 0.69), but no relationship with the number of negative or neutral implications.

This finding suggests that the more targets a policy was intending to impact the more likely the policy was to be successful. The NOQA Denmark policy, for example, positively impacted 55% of the targets. This is somewhat at odds with the policy evaluation literature that suggests that a limited number of clear and focused targets produce better results (Rossi, 2004). One possible explanation for this finding is that the research cases were more likely to report on the positive findings than report on negative or neutral impacts. Another explanation is that it could simply be that the higher number of targets the greater likelihood to achieve at least one, even if the overall success rate relatively low.
7.2.1 Impact of structural features

In order to understand if structural factors impacted the success of policies, an examination was conducted on the relative proportion of implication types reported for cases (N) that had that feature. For example, Figure 7.2 below demonstrates the rates of success by regulatory type. It shows that accreditation style regulation produced positive implications in 46% of the factors targeted. Those conducting quality assurance audits found positive impact on 31% of the targeted areas.

Figure 7.2: Impact by regulatory type

The type of regulatory body was expected to have an influence on the relative impact of policies as quality assurance has less discretionary power than accreditation (as discussed in chapter 4) and the likelihood of policies being mandated and that implementation be monitored is higher. Despite having a slightly higher number of positive implications associated with accreditation, a Chi-square Test of Independence (p>0.05) shows no significant difference between the types.
The type of expectation in the learning outcomes policy is another structural component that is not embedded within the policy but is established through part of the organisational mandate and/or overriding policies (such as the EQF-LL). Figure 7.3 below shows the proportional impact of the level of expectation associated with the policies – ranging from those that run across international boundaries to those that are very specifically targeting a student in one course. It shows that, when combined, the five cases that targeted students (either across courses or within courses) had positive implications in over 40% of the factors addressed. CINDA, for example, targeted students across courses and was successful in achieving over 40% of all its targets. Alternatively, the six that focused on program level outcomes had a positive impact in only 30% of the cases.

Figure 7.3: Proportional impact by level of expectation

![Proportional impact by level of expectation](image_url)

A similar examination of the data on the focus of the expectation (in Figure 7.4 below) shows the negligible influence of the focus of the learning outcomes in the policy: whether generic, at the credential or program level. This finding is somewhat unexpected as literature has suggested that focusing on generic skills is a challenge and that targeting discipline specific learning outcomes
can be successful (Benjamin, 2013b; Lennon & Frank, 2014; Lennon & Jonker, 2014; Tremblay et al., 2012).

Figure 7.4: Proportional impact by focus of expectation

![Proportional impact by focus of expectation](image.png)

### 7.2.2 Impact of policy choices

In order to understand where the policies had impact, this section examines the number and type of implications reported on each policy choice, as well as the proportional impact of polices that targeted that feature. Figure 7.5 below, for example, shows the number of instances where the goal of the policy was influenced in a positive, neutral or undetermined, or negative way. It shows that all of the policies that targeted teaching and learning (N=4) were evaluated to have had positive impact on teaching and learning. Alternatively, of those that targeted learning outcomes’ polices towards improving system design, three had negative results and one was neutral. Examining the results in this way provides insight into goal areas where policies may have more promise.
Another way to examine the impact of policy choice is to see how successful policies containing that policy choice were overall. Figure 7.6 below shows that those four policies targeted at teaching and learning achieved a positive impact in 50% of cases in all of the features they targeted. Alternatively, the policies that focused on international coordination and comparison were successful in 31% of their targets. Together, Figure 7.5 and Figure 7.6 suggest that those policies targeted at teaching and learning were overall more successful at both improving teaching and learning and producing successful results overall. These findings correspond to existing literature that has found a direct effect of learning outcomes on student success (Hattie, 2009a; Hattie, 2009b).
Another policy choice was the focus and involvement of various actors. Figure 7.7 below shows the impact on the various actors associated with the learning outcomes policies and the relative impact on those actors. Cases that reported programs as an ‘involved’ actor reported a high number of positive impacts. Quality assurance was the most frequent actor discussed in the cases, and the general findings suggest that the policies had either a negative impact, or were inconclusive in supporting the actors achieving their goals. Figure 7.8, below shows the relative proportion of implication types reported when specific actors were engaged.
Figure 7.7: Impact on involved actors

Figure 7.8: Proportional impact by actor
Considered together, Figure 7.7 and Figure 7.8 suggest that when involved programs were both positively impacted and also associated with more positive outcomes on the whole. It also seems that learning outcomes policies were relatively unsuccessful in supporting quality assurance activities, and that those policies identifying quality assurance as an involved actor were successful only 35% of the time. This is an important finding as the introduction of learning outcomes policies in quality assurance is a growing trend (as evidenced in the quality assurance survey findings presented in Chapter 5).

An examination of the impact on the target audience of the policy finds fairly neutral results: where there were a few cases that support institutional accountability, there were more cases that found negative implications on program curriculum development (see Figure 7.9 below). Overall, the research cases study analysis in Chapter 6 identified 11 instances of negative impact on the policy target, six neutral and nine positive. This suggests there is limited positive impact on the target audience of the policy. Figure 7.10 below also shows the negligible influence of target audience on overall success.

Figure 7.9: Impact on the target audience
Examine the impact of the strategy type shows that policies addressing issues articulation had a positive or neutral impact (see Figure 7.11 below). The three policies targeted at measuring learning outcomes had mixed results. Those policies that focused on the implementation of learning outcomes had more neutral/undetermined implications. This finding is in line with the evaluation and quality assurance literature that discusses the difficulty in assessing processes that rarely have benchmarks (Amaral & Rosa, 2011: 205). An examination of the overall impact of the policies based on strategy choice found measurement strategies were slightly more likely to produce positive results, but there was no statistical difference between the three (see Figure 7.12 below).
Figure 7.11: Impact by strategy type

- Articulation (n=7)
- Measurement (n=3)
- Implementation (n=6)

Figure 7.12: Proportional impact by strategy type

- Measurement (N=3)
- Articulation (N=7)
- Implementation (N=6)
7.3 Summary

This chapter presented a meta-evaluation of the existing research on learning outcomes policies in higher education regulation. Using evidence collected from nine research evaluations, the analysis presented showed the characteristics, structural features and policy choices.

Nearly every possible type of goals, strategies and policy choices found in the literature (and discussed in Chapter 3), were found in the nine cases: the cases under examination focus on all different levels and focuses, targeted audiences and involved actors. The goals of the policies varied, though a third of the policies aimed to support ‘institutional improvement/quality’. This suggests that within the sample of research cases, there was no pattern in what quality assurance policies are intending to do or how they are doing it.

The differences in the relative impact of structural features of regulatory type, policy focus and level on the success of policies is largely negligible. For example, while those conducting accreditation processes found positive impact on 47% of the targeted areas, compared to 31% for quality assurance, there was not a statistically significant difference between the types. Despite some insight into how the literature applies to evaluation findings, overall, the meta-evaluation of structural elements finds no feature that produced proportionally higher rates of positive impacts.

Examining the overall research results has also shown the policies have been relatively unsuccessful in positively impacting their chosen targets, more often providing no change or a negative outcome on the intended objective. How the presence of each target impacted the overall success of a policy was also considered, and again, the results were largely negligible. While the policies that targeted teaching and learning seemed to achieve a positive impact more frequently, at best they were successful in 50% of time in all of the features they targeted and statistically there was no difference. Overall results found that no policy choice had a higher success rate on either the target or the policy intention overall.

Summed across all cases, ‘neutral or undetermined’ was the most frequent result of the policy evaluations. There are no significant of obvious patterns in how learning outcomes policies are
impacting their targeted goal, or if there are certain policy choices that are producing more favourable impacts. Overall, however, the combined results of the evaluations suggest that learning outcomes policies are not having their intended impact, or at least they have not yet been found to have the positive outcomes desired.

On the whole, the research found that learning outcomes policies were relatively unsuccessful in supporting quality assurance activities. This is an important finding as the introduction of learning outcomes policies in higher education regulation is a growing trend (as evidenced in Chapter 5). It must also be considered, however, that most of the policies/frameworks are less than 10 years old, and also that many focused on the implementation of these policies. Both of these factors challenge the reliability of the findings, as it is difficult to assess the actual impact of policy process. This is an important consideration both for this study as well as the field.

Another possible explanation for the relative neutrality of the policy impact is that the goals and expectations were unachievable, such that the goals could never be achieved through the policy. This explanation would be consistent with the thesis of Stephanie Allais that national qualifications frameworks (and learning outcomes) are not achieving the stated goals of improving system design and labour market alignment because the policies are not designed in a way to do so (Allais, 2009, 2011, 2013). Figure 7.5, for example, illustrates that learning outcomes policies targeted at improving system design and credit transfer had four reports of negative impact, two of no or neutral impact, and no reports of positive impact. Being one of the three most common goals, this finding suggests that there may be issues with the concepts behind the goal choice.

Another possible reason that the policies were found ineffective is that there is a misalignment of goals and targets: if achievable targets were not set, or if in the evaluation there was nothing to benchmark success against, it is impossible to comment on impact (Amaral & Rosa, 2011). For example, labour market alignment and economic development was a targeted goal of four policies, three of which reported no or negative impact. AIKNC, for example, reported no impact as there was no benchmark at the outset, targets assigned or way to measure achievements.
It was outside the scope of this meta-evaluation to pass judgement on the appropriateness of goals, targets and activities, however further research into this could provide insight into a possible disconnect in the policy evaluation cycle. The results of this meta-evaluation call into question the value of learning outcomes policies as a means to improve the quality of higher education through regulatory measures. While only establishing a baseline using nine cases, it suggests that at this time there are no clear promising practices in learning outcomes policies established for quality assurance, accreditation or accountability purposes.

The next and final chapter of this dissertation will explore the possibilities of learning outcomes policies in regulation. It will pull together the lessons learned from the meta-evaluations, the cases studies and the survey of regulatory agencies to establish the current state of activities and knowledge of impact of learning outcomes, and reflect on the contributions, both positive and negative, to the regulation of higher education.
Chapter 8
Discussion and conclusion

This dissertation research sought to understand the impact of learning outcomes policies in higher education regulation. The literature review presented in Chapter 2 established the growing role of learning outcomes as a means to capture and enhance quality in higher education, and Chapter 3 demonstrated the logic behind the investment in seeking fair measures of student capacity for public policy purposes. Chapter 4 presented the conceptual framework that system-level regulation in higher education is the key to managing and monitoring issues of educational quality, and described the ways in which policy evaluations are being applied to learning outcomes and quality assurance practices.

The purpose of this research was to find evidence of how learning outcomes policies are being used in higher education regulatory schemes and what, if any, impact the policies have had. In order to answer these two basic questions the research employed a global survey, case study analysis, and meta-evaluation research methods. Chapter 5 presented the policy goals, strategies, perceptions and research activities of 74 quality assurance, accountability and accreditation organisations. In Chapter 6, nine policy evaluations were analysed and coded for implications of the learning outcomes policies. Finally, Chapter 7 presented a meta-evaluation of the policy evaluation case studies and assessed patterns in the impact of policies.

This final Chapter presents the key findings of the data analyses and triangulates the information to present implications of the research. Three primary implications are presented. The first considers the policy implications of the results; the second considers the implications for regulation; and then implications for higher education more broadly are presented. The limitations of the research and ways that future research can build on these findings are discussed before a final reflection on impact and significance of the study is presented.
8.1 Key findings

The survey, case studies and meta-evaluation research techniques employed in this study each provided evidence-based considerations on the use of learning outcomes in quality enhancement and accountability in higher education regulation. The global survey documented the growing role of learning outcomes in regulatory activities around the world. It showed how learning outcomes are being introduced, implemented and evaluated across the 74 responding agencies and highlighted the variety of policy goals for both the regulatory agencies and the constituent institutions/programs. The survey highlighted the significant differences between intended impact (goals), perceived impact, and the actual impact (based on research) for both the agencies and their member institutions. The main findings from the survey include:

1. Accreditation and quality assurance bodies have different approaches to learning outcomes policies and activities
2. Policies were generally unsuccessful at achieving goals
3. Perceptions about policy impact differ from the actual impact uncovered by research

The case study analyses examined and coded nine policy evaluations for the purposes of a meta-evaluation, though they proved to be interesting independently. The case studies showed the range of activities that are taking place within distinct policy environments and provided information on the strengths and weaknesses of particular policy choices. The case studies explored the qualitative narrative provided by the research cases to uncover perceptions of why policies are succeeding or failing, specifically noting challenges of implementation. Primary interpretations from the case study findings include:

1. Learning outcomes policies may be unsuited to quality assurance audit regulation
2. Fair and valid assessment of student achievement is challenging though promising
3. Policy goals and activities are not always properly aligned.

A meta-evaluation of the nine cases probed into the impact of learning outcomes policies seeking trends in how policies are, or are not, achieving the goals. The primary finding was that the policy impacts were found to be ‘neutral or undetermined’ in most cases. In order to tease out
elements that might impact success, both structural features and policy choices were analysed, ultimately demonstrating the negligible benefits to targeted areas and associated factors. Considerations on how to interpret these findings include:

1. The policies were not mature enough to fairly conduct summative impact evaluations
2. Policies were not designed with performance indicators, therefore it is impossible to benchmark success
3. The goals and expectations of learning outcomes policies may be unachievable

The importance of evaluations was a primary tenet of this dissertation research, and the work sought to provide empirical information on the impact of learning outcomes policies to contribute to policy understanding.

Triangulating the results of the research findings unveils that policies on learning outcomes in higher education regulation are not having the intended impact. This is a significant finding considering the amount of time, effort and political will being put into learning outcomes policies. The finding calls in question the value of learning outcomes as a means to contribute to higher education quality and regulation. Yet, before discarding the entire field of learning outcomes, it is more practical to first consider that the failure is a policy issue.

### 8.2 Policy Implications of findings

As discussed in Chapter 4, policies are basically a “formulated response to a problem” (Inwood, 2004: 207) with intended goals, short term and long-term impacts, and associated activities/strategies to achieve them (Patton, 1998; Rossi et al., 2004). There is a policy cycle by which the policy is formulated, implemented and evaluated (Cerych & Sabatier, 1986; Coates & Lennon, 2014; Inwood, 2004). Findings from this research have identified issues with learning outcomes policies at each of the three stages, where polices were misdirected in concept in formulation, misapplied in implementation, or misaligned in the planned activities and evaluation. The two latter issues are relatively straightforward to address, while the former calls into question the role of learning outcomes policies in regulation. The following discussion tackles these issues in a functional way: from easiest to most difficult to solve.
8.2.1 Policies are being misapplied

For the purposes of this discussion let’s assume that a learning outcomes policy was well founded with reasonable rationales, achievable goals, targeted purposes and benchmarks; and yet still did not succeed. When even the best-planned policy is misapplied, implementation issues can hinder success. Many examples from Chapter 6 illustrate how implementation can impede achievement.

The NOQA Denmark research found it was a challenge for institutions to integrate and map the learning outcomes, particularly to the labour market. Similarly, the NOQA Finland case found it was difficult for the programs to develop internal learning outcomes and align their programming with the NQF regulations. Moreover, even the auditors tasked with judging the quality of the learning outcomes in Finland felt unequipped to evaluate the progress or provide constructive feedback.

The case study findings noting the challenges of implementation are corroborated through the global survey of regulatory agencies where the most frequent argument against learning outcomes was “burdensome administrative task/lack of operational support”. In retrospect, these two options could have been presented as separate choices for the survey respondents. Nonetheless, it points to process and implementation issues as a barrier to success.

Issues of implementation are simple to understand as an impediment to success and, with appropriate formative evaluations and attention, can be straightforward to rectify. This finding correlates with the literature review in Chapter 2 that revealed that the bulk of work in learning outcomes deals with implementation issues. It also provides an explanation of why process is a primary focus of organizations such as the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

8.2.2 Policies are misaligned

The literature suggests that a policy should have an established goal, long-term targets, short-term targets, benchmarks, and evaluations appropriate to capture change (Patton, 1998; Rossi et al., 2004). There are, of course, variations on this, but the basic cycle is a feedback loop. In fact, it mimics the role of learning outcomes – establish what the expectations are, incorporate them
into the programing and measure whether students have gained the expected knowledge, skills and competencies. When one of those elements is misaligned the cycle cannot work. For example, if learning outcomes are written but not implemented, there will likely be no change in student achievement. Similarly, there is no valuable information gained if student achievement is measured but expectations and indications of success are not clearly defined. The concept of ‘plan it, do it, measure it’ is simple and many learning outcomes policies employ it. The global survey found that the majority of regulatory agencies policies expect institutions/programs to establish and implement learning outcomes and provide evidence of student achievement.

However, not only do the right steps have to be taken, the right decisions must be made when designing the policy: the policy choices must be able to lead to the desired outcomes. Examples from the case studies find this is not always happening. For example, NOQA Denmark noted that where the goal was to use learning outcomes as a tool for employers and the labour market, the strategy did not involve employers or develop ways of demonstrating achievement to the labour market (focusing instead on curriculum mapping). In another example, QAA PS failed to achieve the goal of supporting transparency for students and employers, perhaps because it focused on writing program-specific outcomes for curriculum rather than focusing on outward facing activities of demonstrating achievement through something like an e-portfolio or learning passport.

Other alignment issues are found in the use of evidence, data collection and evaluations. What evidence is being used to determine the success or failure of the policies? Policies need to have clearly identified data collection methods with clearly identified targets. Furthermore, it is also critical that the data are able to reflect change and, moreover, that change can be directly attributed to the policy. For example, expecting learning outcomes to improve labour market outcomes and examining national data on employment rates will not be able to provide suitable information on the impact of learning outcomes policies as it could be a reflection of any number of other factors.

Table 8.1 below provides rough examples of how policies might be designed to achieve stated goals. It presents the policy choices that provide a feedback loop which, when used, could
provide fair information on impact. The examples are not indented to be prescriptive, but illustrations of how better policy alignment can be achieved.
Table 8.1: Examples of aligned policy cycles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Audience needs</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Expected impact</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional improvement</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Program developer</td>
<td>Alignment of goals and activities</td>
<td>Curriculum mapping</td>
<td>Improved curriculum</td>
<td>Improved student progression</td>
<td>Administrative data</td>
<td>Improved student throughputs and outputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved teaching activities</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>Faculty members</td>
<td>Improved Course design</td>
<td>Course development</td>
<td>Alignment of assessment activities and LO's</td>
<td>Faculty feedback</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>% of courses redesigned and comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved student learning</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Institution or program</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Student learning improvement</td>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>Improved student test scores</td>
<td>Longitudinal or cross-sectional</td>
<td>Test</td>
<td>Student success pre- and post implementat-ion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Clear indications of capacities</td>
<td>Summative e-portfolio</td>
<td>Improved labour market outcomes</td>
<td>Job closely aligned to program</td>
<td>National Grad survey/</td>
<td>Comparative analysis of cohorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>Clear indications of capacities</td>
<td>Learning passport</td>
<td>Better skill-matching in labour market</td>
<td>Fewer concerns with 'unprepared graduates'</td>
<td>Employer survey</td>
<td>Comparative analysis of cohorts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The alignment of goals, purpose, activities and evaluation is a useful way to consider policy failure in the cases presented in the research. It suggests that somewhere between setting the goal and evaluating impact there may have been one or more components that were not suitable. Identifying these alignment issues could inform a better policy – one that is targeted, with appropriate activities, and reasonable indications of impact.

8.2.3 Policies are misdirected

If it is assumed that the learning outcomes policies included in this research were properly aligned and implemented, the implication is that learning outcomes policies are not working because there is a fundamental disconnect between the desired and the actual outcomes. In this case a policy is misdirected: it has been formulated to achieve an unattainable goal.

The survey results presented in Chapter 5 of this dissertation clearly demonstrate differences in the goals organisations set for policies as well as in the perceptions of impact and actual research findings on impact. Other than one factor, none of the goals set for the agencies for themselves or the member institutions had high success rates. Moreover, two benefits that were considered highly impacted by the policy were unintended: the improvement in credit transfer and the benefit to economic development.

Also interesting is the disconnection between the perception of impact and the research findings uncovered in the survey. The perception of impact on organisational goals was much lower than the impact found in the research. Alternatively, the actual impact on institutions was greater than expected. These differences indicate that there is a discrepancy between what learning outcomes polices are expected to do and what they can actually achieve.

The meta-evaluation also demonstrates the general failure of the policies to achieve the espoused goals. Figure 7.5 in Chapter 7, for example, shows that only ‘Teaching and learning’ was positively impacted every time it was a chosen goal. ‘Quality and institutional improvement’ was successful in half the cases, while those that focused on improving ‘System design and credit transfer’ were never successful.

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40 Improving economic development.
The case studies also reveal that the goal choice may influence the success rates. The difference in the success of QAA SBS and QAA FHEQ policies provide a clear example of how two policies with different goals had different outcomes. The policies were similar in many ways: they came from the same jurisdiction, had the same structural features and each had a similar number of policy choices and targets. The FHEQ was established as a qualifications framework with goals to improve ‘Transparency,’ ‘System design and credit transfer’ as well as ‘International coordination and comparison’. Overall the policy had less than a 20% success rate. The QAA SBS focused on subject-based issues of the ‘Teaching and learning’, ‘Institutional improvement/quality’, ‘System design and credit transfer’, and ‘Labour market alignment and economic development’. The policy was successful in positively impacting 80% of its targets.

The different outcomes of the two policies are remarkable, and yet are somewhat consistent with other research. Allais, for example, has contended that national qualifications frameworks are not achieving their system-level goals of improving qualification transparency or credit transfer decision-making (Allais, 2010). Hattie, on the other hand, presented a meta-evaluation to show the positive impact of learning outcomes on teaching and learning (2009).

Hence, although the findings in this research are only descriptive, and there were no statistically significant differences in the types of policy goals, it is reasonable to suggest that the goals of the learning outcomes policies should be seriously considered prior to any planning or implementation. It is vital to ensure goals reflect the reality of what could be reasonably expected.

### 8.3 Implications for regulation

The previous section considered the issues of policy implementation, alignment and direction, supposing that the policy process is the critical factor in the success or failure in learning outcomes frameworks. If it is assumed that the policies evaluated were intended to be influential rather than symbolic (as suggested by Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, & Vedung, 2011), it is rational to expect change was desired. Hence, another consideration, is that it is not the policies themselves, but rather the structural confines of the regulation body that hinders policy impact. Perhaps it is
the agencies’ sphere of control, ability to implement policies in institutions (either by carrot or stick), or the model of regulation that influences the ability of learning outcomes policy.

This study established and applied three models of regulation: accountability, accreditation and quality assurance. The term accountability refers to government supervision of multiple aspects of institutions. Accreditation is a process of validating explicit external standards, and Quality Assurance is a process of evaluating institutionally designated goals utilizing two primary forms: assessments and audits.

Sixty per cent of the global survey respondents were from accreditation agencies and, within the case studies and the meta-evaluation, 60% were from quality assurance agencies. Accountability agencies represented 4% of the survey respondents, and only one case in the meta-evaluation. Findings from both the survey and meta-evaluation found little difference in the overall impact of policies based on regulatory type.

Having found that policy activities do not always align with broad goals, it is also possible to consider that policy goals do not align with the broad mandate of agencies. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the goals of the agencies to see if certain trends in the type of goals were more likely to succeed. The Accountability Diamond put forth by Middlehurst (2011) and discussed in Chapter 4, is one way to better understand how the policies are aimed to support the priorities of regulation.

In

41 NOQA Norway had both a quality assurance process and an accreditation process, but the research focused only on quality assurance.
Figure 8.1 below, the Accountability Diamond is used to assess the underlying focus by demonstrating where the learning outcomes policy goals fall. The placement of the research cases (1-9) are determined through the goal choices established in Chapter 6. The goal options of ‘Teaching and learning’ and ‘Institutional improvement/quality’ are closely related to Academic Concerns. ‘System design and credit transfer’ is aligned to State Priorities, where ‘Labour market alignment and economic development’ is situated between State Priorities and Market Forces. ‘International coordination and comparison’ clearly aligns with Supra-National Interests. ‘Transparency’ as a tool to support student choice, market awareness, etc. is placed closest to Market Forces. Based on the combination of the goals the cases are placed on the diamond, and the colours (green, yellow and red) reflect their success.
Figure 8.1: Learning outcomes policy goals in the accountability diamond

1 = AIKNC
2 = CINDA
3 = QAA FHEQ
4 = QAA SBS
5 = QAA PS
6 = NOQA Denmark
7 = NOQA Finland
8 = NOQA Norway
9 = NOQA Sweden
Examining the nine cases mapped against the Accountability Diamond shows that the underlying focus of learning outcomes policies varies, as do the impact results. This is particularly interesting as the majority are quality assurance audits. The placement of the cases shows that the policies are, arguably, out of line with the role and abilities of quality assurance agencies. Based on the capacities and goals of quality assurance audits, it could reasonably be expected that the majority of the cases would lean towards Academic Concerns.

For this reason it is possible that the policies are not the problem, but instead that it is an issue with the regulatory bodies as organisational bodies. Bush describes the structural model of organisations suggesting that organisations exist to accomplish goals and that it is inappropriate structure or inadequate systems that create inefficiencies (2003: 39). It is possible to consider then, that the way the regulatory agencies operate is the hindrance to policy success.

### 8.3.1 Implications for quality assurance

The findings presented in Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate that learning outcomes policies are not successful when used in quality assurance audits. Only when intended to support teaching and learning were the policies at all effective. Perhaps, this is because the activities fall on the improvement side of the accountability/improvement spectrum as they focused on structural and organisational issues (Amaral & Rosa, 2011). Gallavara et al. note “quality audits focus on the institutions internal quality assurance system” (2008: 41). In other words, procedures are in place to continuously improve teaching, research and other activities. Audits do not evaluate the quality of teaching or research itself but the quality procedures and the way in which they are operated – they focus on the formative.

This requires that systems be in place to support the activities associated with learning outcomes policies. Yet, implementation issues are found to be a significant barrier throughout this study. Furthermore, it also demands that the auditors are skilled in learning outcomes and are trained in order to fairly judge quality of learning outcomes, and the implementation and measurement

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42 Cases 2 and 6 were accreditation agencies, and case 9 employed accountability processes
43 He puts forth five basic models for organisation and leadership: structural, systematic, bureaucratic, rational, and hierarchical.
techniques employed within the institutions and programs. This was found to be a significant issue in Finland, for example.

It follows, then, that quality assurance policies outside of the realm of teaching and learning may be not effective as they are unable to support or influence change, or judge impact. A learning outcomes policy intended to improve labour market outcomes, for example, may not be the easiest target to achieve because it is outside the sphere of control and influence of a quality assurance agency. In a similar case, Amaral and Rosa (2011) found that when examining the use of audits in the Institutional Evaluation Programme of the EUA, the activities did not contribute to the transparency and comparability of programming across the EU (despite being an explicit purpose of the programme).

Another issue with the use of learning outcomes policy in quality assurance is that quality assurance mechanisms can be ineffective at identifying low quality (Amaral & Rosa, 2011) the purpose is to support not to judge. Therefore, it begs the question of how can learning outcomes – which are intended to support quality improvements by providing tangible evidence of student achievement – be useful to a system that is known to be unable to assess success?

It becomes apparent that for learning outcomes policies in quality assurance to have any likelihood for success, they should be focused on supporting the processes of activities, using multiple feedback loops to support that purpose.

8.3.2 Implications for accreditation

The findings of this research project clearly demonstrate the need for objective outcomes/summative assessments of student success as well as policy impact. All three research approaches used in this study indicate that that there is a great deal of work in writing learning outcomes, and that implementing them presents the most significant challenges. However, until an assessment of the outcomes is completed, there is no tangible understanding of the abilities of students.

This is most clearly seen in the perceived versus actual impact of the learning outcomes found in the survey. The differences between what is believed to be true and what is actually true can be
very different. This corroborates other studies on the assessment of learning outcomes. The AHLEO Feasibility Study, for example, found that although a Civil Engineering test was developed by an international team, vetted in nine countries by hundreds of faculty members and students, the results – globally – were much lower than anticipated (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). This demonstrates that the expected learning outcomes do not always translate into actual student achievement, and shows that assessment is critical to identifying the discrepancies.

The measurement component presents the most potential for accreditation to have impact on the quality of education, as summative assessments are in the wheelhouse of accreditation style regulation (see Ewell, 2009). It also presents a significant challenge to identify appropriate assessments and ways of demonstrating student achievement as well as program or institutional success. NOQA Norway, for example, noted the difficulties in ascertaining the ‘pass line’ and how to enact the standard across the country. NOQA Sweden, similarly, found it extremely difficult to balance background noise with program success, and overall found it extremely costly.

NOQA Sweden’s case study also found that the professional programs were better able to assess student achievement. The QAA SBS which also focused at the disciplinary level, was found to be the most successful policy overall. These two findings suggest that perhaps there is value in focusing on discipline/subject areas, where it is more likely to be possible to identify both generic and specific learning outcomes, and come to terms with valid and reliable assessments. Given the challenges in learning outcomes policies identified throughout this research, it is possible that disciplinary accreditation agencies are perhaps the best suited to have successful policy impacts.

A significant amount of work is taking place at the disciplinary level. Though not captured in this research, the literature review uncovered numerous activities focused in both professional and traditionally academic disciplinary spheres. For example, the suite of Tuning projects are establishing norms across disciplines in regions all over the world, and smaller, independent,

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44 I.e., Institutional characteristics such as diversity of students, entering GPA’s, etc.
activities such as the ATLAS project which maps learning outcomes and assessments across public policy programs (Clark, Eisen, Lennon, & Pal, 2015). Similarly, Engineering Accreditation associations around the world have come together to establish expectations and indications of evidence. It is important to acknowledge the important role of the disciplines in managing expectations of student learning outcomes, as they are (either directly or indirectly) responsible for establishing the norms within their own their field.

Acknowledging the role of other agencies in the higher education regulator landscape is a reminder of why the agency type should be an indicator of what the learning outcomes priorities should be. There should be a connection between the model of regulation and the priorities places on learning outcomes policies. Accreditation agencies should, quite rightly, require actual information on student abilities, where audits others need only establish that appropriate strategies are in place.

The focus of the expectation for which an agency is responsible should also have an influence on the activities. This study included only a few agencies that used learning outcomes policies in accountability frameworks. However, it would be expected that disciplinary agencies and governments should have different priorities and abilities. For example, accredited, professional programs tend to be developed in a modular, cohort type curriculum model, which is well suited to student learning, but not supportive of student mobility, accessibility, flexibility, etc. which are issues for which a government is responsible. Respecting the confines of the agency type, policies should be targeted at what is reasonable to expect from their existing process.

Ultimately, evaluation is critical for understanding student achievement and accreditation agencies are poised to be able to ascertain the impact through evaluations in a way that quality assurance cannot. This finding is corroborated by the literature that notes accreditation has been a major driver of reform and development of learning outcomes (Banta, 2007; Gannon-Slater et al., 2014; Kinzie, 2010; Wright, 2002). When there are clearly agreed upon identifiers of achievement and quality, there is less need to monitor the organisational and process functions (which is the primary function of both accountability and quality assurance activities). Similarly, according to Stensaker, Rosa, & Westerheijden, “when you’ve got standards you don’t need instruments controlling and coordinating complex relationships” (2007: 252).
Considering the role of agencies as drivers of quality improvement or keepers of standards, this highlights the important difference between formative and summative research activities in the types of results they produce, and the uses of those results. Formative evaluations are useful for quality improvement activities, where summative results have more value to assessment activities. It is the primary difference between how learning outcomes policies should be developed with the regulatory type in mind.

8.4 Implications for higher education

In the modern knowledge based society, the massification of higher education has expanded the number and type of institutional and program offerings available to students. It has shifted the expectations on the system (which is increasingly operating as a commercial commodity) where there are promises made and expectations placed on educational providers. The explosion of providers and types of provision has increased the need for external oversight, from governmental, member-based institutional, discipline or professional associations in order to assure the quality of provision.

As the National Governors Association has observed, “access without quality is a cruel deception” (National Governors Association, 1986: 10). Hence, the need for fair evaluations of educational quality is justifiable, and the assumption that learning outcomes are a means to do so is understandable. The belief that clarifying educational expectations supports the achievement of those expectations is logical. It follows, then, that Teichler and Shomburg had reason to suggest that incorporating learning outcomes into accountability regimes could provide quantifiable information on the quality of education (2013).

In the higher education market, oversight and regulation is increasingly important for providers to be seen as trustworthy and reputable. For the student (the consumer), it is critical that they are protected and provided with high quality education. However, the laundry list of expected benefits stemming from learning outcomes is beyond the scope of any policy. It has been demonstrated in this research that regulatory agencies expect that learning outcomes can impact everything from the broader issues of economic development, labour market alignment, institutional improvement and credit transfer. These are issues for which a ‘system’ of higher
education is generally responsible, and require the engagement of all stakeholders, through multiple policies, and layers of feedback loops to improve.

8.5 Limitations, considerations and future research

The findings of this study call into question the value of learning outcomes policies as a means to contribute to quality in higher education through regulation. While the triangulation of three research methods was used to find objective interpretations of learning outcomes policies and impact the results must be regarded with some caution.

As with any survey, the participants represented only a sample of regulatory agencies and activities around the world. The participants, as members of INQAAHE and CIQG were primarily accreditation agencies or quality assurance agencies. Only a small number of respondents were government agencies using accountability frameworks. Considering the significant role of government in funding, directing and regulating higher education, it is increasingly common for governments to have a policy or framework for learning outcomes such as a national qualifications framework, and it may differ from those of the quality assurance and accreditation agencies. Hence, future research could review the differences in structure, policy choices and impacts of government activities. Allais and colleagues (Allais et al., 2009; Allais, 2014), for example, have done considerable work on the role of learning outcomes and national qualifications frameworks. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of governments with NQF’s with those of the quality assurance and accreditation agencies captured in this study could provide some insight into the role of accountability processes.

One aspect that was not part of the study (beyond one survey question) was the issue of finances and the cost of learning outcomes policies. It is unclear who is funding the activities and how they are operationalized, or indeed how much they cost. If it is found that the policies are fairly inexpensive to develop, implement and assess then the negligible benefits may be worthwhile. However, it is more likely that governments, agencies and institutions alike are investing significant amounts of time, resources and political will into the policy activities. Given the lacklustre results in terms of policy impact, research into the finances of the activities would be valuable in weighing the costs and benefits of enacting a policy. In fact, if the policies were
treated more as an investment it is possible that the intended results would be more clearly identified and tangible. Hence, considering costs of developing learning outcomes policies might be extremely beneficial.

Another limitation of this study was that it framed the expectations and activities based on the higher education policy literature, and reviewed the impact based on the stated goals. It is possible that there are unintended implications from these policies, both positive and negative. It was a choice not to consider the fundamental implications of the role that learning outcomes might play in altering education delivery, curriculum choices, assessment types, etc. There is vast literature on teaching and learning and the role of learning outcomes both in the classroom and from a sociological perspective, particularly from the K-12 sector where outcomes-based educational practices have been in place much longer. Though higher education learning outcomes policies and regulation issues are distinct in many ways, further research should not overlook the decades of experience from other sectors in clarifying and harmonizing curriculum.

At the outset, this study assumed that learning outcomes policies were useful tools to provide aggregate information on the quality of education as captured through student knowledge. This supposed that other indicators such as student satisfaction, engagement, labour market outcomes, etc., called ‘proxies’ in Chapter 4, were providing only subjective information. While this might be the case, perhaps it is enough. As it stands today, these indicators appear to provide better indications of education quality than learning outcomes.

This presents two options for future work. The first is to explore other, more tangible indicators of educational quality. Teacher quality, for example, is an area under increasing scrutiny and may provide some insight. It may be a step backwards, however, as it may revert education from being student-centred back to being teacher-centred. Another promising avenue is to work to find appropriate measurements and assessments of learning outcomes for use at the program or institutional level rather than the individual student level. This will be the only way learning outcomes will be able to provide tangible indications of quality.
8.6 Significance and contribution

Most arguments against learning outcomes are philosophical. They contend that they corrupt learning (Furedi, 2012), propagate the homogenous (Brancaleone & O’Brien, 2011), cater to the lowest common denominator for commercial purposes (Young, 2007), and perpetuate social inequality through the accumulation of status though education (Allais et al., 2009; Allais, 2014; Wheelahan, 2009). These are valid arguments; but to this point in time, learning outcomes have done very little. What this study presents is empirical data and information that should calm the philosophical debates because, today, the point is moot.

The ‘hype cycle’ that peaks when innovations are both exalted for their possibilities and condemned for their failures is precisely where learning outcomes activities are today. The survey of activities around the world shows how much interest and hope there is for improving quality provision and regulation of higher education through learning outcomes, and the meta-evaluation has shown that the results of the activities have not been particularly successful. Following the ‘hype cycle’ pattern, it is now time to climb the ‘slope of enlightenment’, with second and third generation policies improving on the ones before, in order to settle into the most effective manner in which learning outcomes policies can be applied. The findings of this study shift the ‘hype cycle’ process along by demonstrating where the area of promise lie, and recommendations on how to improve existing practices.

A primary discovery of this study is that learning outcomes polices in regulatory agencies are not having the intended effect because the policies themselves are poorly developed. The laissez-faire supposition that polices will be effective just by existing is as ridiculous as supposing that written statements of what students will achieve by the end of program means students will have achieved it. What this dissertation has presented is the policy process and variety of choices available to policy makers. It illuminates policy opportunities, and presents the policy cycle – in its entirety – as necessary.

More significant than any commentary on learning outcomes policies, this study underlines the importance of evaluation. In both the microcosm of learning outcomes cycles of ‘articulate, incorporate, measure’ and the macrocosm of the ‘formulate, implement, evaluate’ policy cycle,
the value of closing the loop is highlighted. Furthermore, asking the simple questions of ‘what, why and how’ a concept can be operationalized is just as important and the concept itself.

Conceptually, learning outcomes make sense. But the final component of assessment tying the cycle together is sadly missing from the literature and policy conversation. Without that feedback loop, it is impossible to rectify problems and move towards achieving goals. Hence, the most important take-away from this research is that higher education regulatory policies need to be carefully evaluated in order to understand the value of policy choices and that within these evaluations the value of summative information cannot be overestimated.
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Appendix A: Survey tool

Learning outcomes are statements of what students are expected to know and be able to do at the end of an educational program. Many oversight and regulatory organizations have introduced learning outcomes (also called expectations, competencies, proficiencies, learning objectives, etc.) into their accountability, accreditation and quality assurance policies and frameworks.

This survey seeks information on the activities and policies of tertiary education quality assurance, oversight and regulatory organizations in developing, implementing, and assessing learning outcomes, as well as any research conducted on the impact of the work. This study looks at how learning outcomes are contributing to identifying and supporting quality in higher education around the world.

This survey could take up to 10 minutes to complete as you may be asked more specific questions depending on the type of work your organization conducts. The first section deals with the structure and function of your organization, the second requests information on your learning outcomes policies and framework documents, the third inquires about administrative issues, and the final section inquires about evaluations you may have conducted on your policies and activities. With apologies, this survey is only available in English.

Participation in the survey is voluntary. At any time you may choose not to answer a question or withdraw from the survey. Following your participation, if you decide to withdraw from the study please email me and I will destroy my notes and all data collected. You may withdraw at any time without consequence, penalty or judgment.

The participation of your organization will be recorded and made public in lists, tables and text. Your personal information is requested for administrative purposes only. Your personal identity will be removed from the data, kept confidential and not used in the final study, in future publications or presentations.

There are no risks associated with participation. At no time will you be judged, evaluated or at risk of harm. No value judgments will be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness in your organization or of the organization itself.

Upon completion of the study, you can have access to the final report which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection and which can be accessed electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository (TSpace) at https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944.

This study is carried out under the supervision of Professor Glen Jones, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study, or if you have any complaints or concerns about your treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics of the University of Toronto.

My contact information, that of my advisor and the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto is as follows:

Mary Catharine Lennon
marycath.lennon@utoronto.ca

Prof. Glen Jones
glen.jones@utoronto.ca

University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics
Ethics.review@utoronto.ca

By checking the box below you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study and that you are fully aware of the conditions above.

PLEASE PRINT/SAVE A COPY OF THIS LETTER FOR YOUR RECORDS
1. PLEASE CLICK 'I CONSENT' TO ENTER THE SURVEY
   - I consent
   - I do not consent

2. Name of organisation

3. Country

4. State/Province (if applicable)

5. Your name

6. Your title

7. Your e-mail address

8. Please choose the most appropriate description of your organisation
   - Government department
   - Independent or arms length government agency
   - Private/Member based association
   - Professional/disciplinary association
   - Institution (i.e. college, polytechnic, university, etc.)
   - Other (please specify)

9. At what geo-political level does your organisation operate?
   - International/multi-national
   - National
   - Sub-national (i.e. state/province)
   - Multi-sub-national
   - Other (please specify)

10. What year was your organisation/agency established?
11. Does your organisation provide oversight or regulate the provision of higher education credentials (for example, through accountability, accreditation or quality assurance frameworks)?
- Yes
- No

12. Does your organisation have a policy or framework relating to the use of learning outcomes in higher education institutions?
- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify)

13. Has your organisation conducted any formal evaluations of your learning outcomes policy or framework?
- Yes
- No

14. Do you operate under the umbrella of formal qualifications frameworks? (Check all that apply)
- Multi-national qualifications framework (e.g. European Qualifications Framework)
- National qualifications framework
- Sub-national qualifications framework (i.e., state/province)
- Multi-sub-national qualifications framework
- Other (please specify)

15. Which credential type does your organisation oversee/regulate? (Check all that apply)
- Vocational education credential (ISCED 4)
- College diploma (ISCED 5)
- Bachelor/undergraduate degree (ISCED 6)
- Graduate degree (ISCED 7)
- Other (please specify)
16. Does your organisation oversee/regulate: (check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public institutions</th>
<th>New</th>
<th>Existing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign institutions/providers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional disciplines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs (regardless of institution type)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Does your organisation provide oversight or regulation through: (choose most appropriate description)

- Accountability agreements (government set obligations on institutions for which they must demonstrate compliance)
- Accreditation processes (an evaluation process that ends with a summative judgement leading to a formal approval of a program or institution)
- Quality assurance (audits / assessments) (evaluation of institutionally designated goals through external scrutiny)
- Other (please specify) | |

18. Does your organization have a policy or framework on learning outcomes?

- Yes
- We are in the process of developing a policy or framework
- No

19. What year was the policy or framework first established?

20. Were existing oversight/regulatory measures altered with the introduction of learning outcomes policies?

- Learning outcomes were introduced as an addition to the existing regulatory measures and performance indicators
- Learning outcomes were introduced along with minor modifications to existing regulatory measures and performance indicators
- Learning outcomes were introduced along with major modifications to existing regulatory measures and performance indicators
- Learning outcomes replaced existing regulatory measures and performance indicators
- Other (please specify) | |
21. **Was there resistance to the introduction of learning outcomes policies from... (check all that apply)**

- National/jurisdictional associations/ unions
- Institutional executives
- Institutional administration/staff
- Academic units/programs
- Faculty associations/unions
- Faculty members
- Student associations/unions
- Other (please specify)

22. **What were the arguments against incorporating learning outcomes into an institution/program? (Check all that apply)**

- Infringement on institutional/program/professional autonomy
- Burdensome administrative task/lack of operational support
- Interference in classroom/depersonalisation of teaching
- Inappropriate learning outcomes/focusing on the wrong things
- Turning education into a 'product'/homogenization and commodification of education
- Subjugation of 'non-mainstream' knowledge
- Harmful to student learning
- Other (please specify)

23. **Are your comments above (on resistance and arguments) based on... (check all those that apply)**

- Anecdotal information or informal feedback
- Formal feedback from stakeholders
- Research
- Other (please specify)
24. Has your organisation established a 'set' of learning outcomes for graduating students?
- Yes
- We use the pre-existing qualifications framework designations
- We are in the process of developing a 'set' of learning outcomes
- No, we do not have a prescribed 'set' but institutions/programs must use learning outcomes
- No, we do not have a prescribed 'set' but encourage institutions to use learning outcomes

Other (please specify)

25. Are you able to share the set of learning outcomes?
- No, it is not available
- Yes, it is available electronically and can be sent via email
- Yes, it is available in hard copy and can be sent via postal mail
- Yes, it is available online (please provide website links)

26. What learning outcomes do you require/support the use of?
- Already established sets of learning outcomes
- Internally developed learning outcomes

Other (please specify)

27. How were the expectations established? (Choose most appropriate description)
- Adapted from the qualifications framework
- Developed by learning assessment experts
- Developed by faculty members
- Other (please specify)
28. Does the policy/framework indicate who (or what) learning outcomes intend to support? (Check all that apply)

☐ Students
☐ Public/employers
☐ Faculty members (course design or teaching)
☐ Program (curriculum development)
☐ Institution (internal and external accountability)
☐ System level (coordination and accountability)
☐ Regional/international coordination
☐ Other (please specify)

29. What did the policy/framework indicate as the long term benefits of learning outcomes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>For your organisation</th>
<th>For the institutions/programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Credit transfer/articulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved system design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour market alignment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional / International</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>compatibility and comparison</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

30. Were short term targets established for YOUR ORGANISATION? I.e. all institutions will incorporate learning outcomes into curriculum by 2020.

☐ Yes
☐ No
31. Are the short term targets for your organisation related to...(check all that apply)

☐ Articulating learning outcomes
☐ Implementing learning outcomes
☐ Measuring/assessing learning outcomes (i.e. large-scale or in class assessments)
☐ Signalling/demonstrating student achievement of learning outcomes (i.e. e-portfolios)
☐ Other (please specify) _________________

32. Were clear short term targets established for the PROGRAMS/INSTITUTIONS? (i.e. each program must be able to demonstrate student achievement of learning outcomes by 2020)

☐ Yes
☐ No

33. Are the short term targets for programs/institutions related to...(check all that apply)

☐ Articulating learning outcomes
☐ Implementing learning outcomes
☐ Measuring/assessing learning outcomes (i.e. large-scale or in class assessments)
☐ Signalling/demonstrating student achievement of learning outcomes (i.e. e-portfolios)
☐ Other (please specify) _________________

34. Are institutions/programs required to provide evidence that they use learning outcomes in curriculum planning and programming?

☐ Yes, institutions must demonstrate that they are implementing learning outcomes
☐ We are in the process of developing policies/indicators for evidence
☐ No, we do not require evidence of implementation
☐ Other (please specify) _________________

35. How do institutions/programs provide evidence that they have implemented learning outcomes into programming? (Check all that apply)

☐ Policy statements
☐ Program initiatives aligning learning outcomes
☐ Targeted funding to support curriculum development
☐ Other (please specify) _________________
36. Do you require institutions/programs to provide evidence of student achievement of learning outcomes?

- Yes, institutions must show how students meet the learning outcomes
- We are in the process of implementing a policy/indicators to be used
- No, we do not require institutions to show student achievement
- Other (please specify)

37. How do institutions/programs signal or demonstrate student achievement of learning outcomes to you? (Check all that apply)

- Standard assessment results
- Outcome-based/co-curricular transcripts
- E-portfolios/badges
- Classroom based evaluations
- Other (please specify)

38. Does your organisation require that institutions use a standard assessment of student learning? (i.e. a national leaving exam, assessment of generic skills, literacy, numeracy, etc.)

- Yes, there is at least one common assessment tool all institutions/programs must use
- Yes, institutions must use a standard assessment tool of their choice
- We are in the process of establishing a policy on standard assessment
- No
- Other (please specify)

39. Has your organisation conducted (or contracted) any formal evaluations or reviews of your learning outcomes policies and frameworks?

- Yes
- No
- Research is currently underway
40. What type of research was conducted? (check all that apply)

- Interviews or surveys of administration, faculty, staff, etc. on the topic of learning outcomes
- Research on the number of institutions that have developed/mapped/measured student achievement of learning outcomes
- Research on the financial implications associated with developing/mapping/measuring learning outcomes
- Evaluations on the impact of learning outcomes policies within the institutions. I.e. evaluating improvements in teaching and learning practice, changes in curriculum design, institutional improvement, etc.
- Evaluations on the impact of learning outcomes policies within your organisation. I.e. research into the effect of learning outcomes on institutional improvement, credit transfer, system design, etc.
- Evaluations on the impact of learning outcomes policies within your jurisdiction. I.e. research into the effect of learning outcomes on labour market alignment, economic development, international collaborations, etc.
- Other (please specify)

41. Does the research indicate that the learning outcomes policy/framework had an impact on...(check all that apply)

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42. Are you able to share this research?

- No, it is not available
- Yes, it is available electronically and can be sent via email
- Yes, it is available in hard copy and can be sent via postal mail
- Yes, it is available online (please provide website links)
43. Do you think the learning outcomes policy/framework had an impact on...(check all that apply)

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44. Is your insight based on...(check all those that apply)

- [ ] Anecdotal information or informal feedback
- [ ] Formal feedback from stakeholders
- [ ] Other research
- [ ] Other (please specify)

45. If your organisation is selected, would you be willing to answer follow up questions either via email, telephone/internet voice services or in a face-to-face interview?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Please provide email address

46. Thank you very much for your participation in this research.

Do you have any comments that you would like to share?
Appendix B: Survey consultants

Dr. Glen Jones  
Ontario Research Chair in Postsecondary Education Policy and Measurement  
Professor, Higher Education  
Department of Leadership, Adult and Higher Education  
OISE, University of Toronto  
Canada

Dr. Michael Skolnik  
Professor Emeritus, Higher Education  
Department of Leadership, Adult and Higher Education,  
OISE, University of Toronto  
Canada

Dr. Ian Clark,  
Professor, School of Public Policy and Governance  
University of Toronto  
Canada

Dr. Ken Norrie  
Professor Emeritus, Economics  
McMaster University  
Canada

Dr. Hamish Coates  
Professor, Higher Education  
Centre for the Studies of Higher Education, University of Melbourne  
Australia
Dr. Satoko Fukahori
Senior Researcher, Department for Higher Education Research
National Institute for Educational Policy Research
Japan

Mr. Charlie Lenth
Retired Vice President for Policy Analysis and Academic Affairs
State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO)
USA

Dr. Julian Patricio Mariño von Hildebrand,
Jefe de Evaluación, CIFE en Universidad de los Andes
Colombia

Dr. Hesham Wagih Gomma
Section Manager, Planning and Performance Management
Abu Dhabi Education Council
United Arab Emirates

Dr. Peter T. Ewell
President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)
USA

Dr. Ursula McCloy
Research Project Manager, Centre for Research in Student Mobility
Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology
Canada
# Appendix C: Survey skip logic

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Appendix D: Ethics protocol approval letter

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 31114

January 19, 2015

Dr. Glen Jones
OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT
EDUCATION
OISE/UT

Ms. Mary Catharine Lennon
OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT
EDUCATION
OISE/UT

Dear Dr. Jones and Ms. Mary Catharine Lennon,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "In search of quality: Evaluating the impact of higher education learning outcomes initiatives"

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: January 19, 2015
Expiration Date: January 19, 2016
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMurrich Building, 12 Queen's Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1S8 Canada
Tel: +1 416 946-3273 • Fax: +1 416 946-5763 • ethics.review@utoronto.ca • http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics/
Appendix E: Survey email invitation

Hello,

I am writing to invite your organisation to participate in a survey on the use of learning outcomes in higher education quality assurance. The study examines how learning outcomes are contributing to quality in higher education through quality assurance, regulatory and oversight activities.

I am surveying members of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Group. As your organisation is a current member, I hope that an individual from your agency who has familiarity with policies and research activities would be willing to respond to a short survey. I hope your participation today should encourage dialogue on the role and value of learning outcomes in quality assurance in your organisation.

This survey could take up to 10 minutes to complete, but depending on the type of work your organization conducts it could take as little as 5. The first section deals with the structure and function of your organization, the second requests information on your learning outcomes policies and framework documents, the third inquires about implementation issues, and the final section inquires about evaluations you have conducted on your policies and activities. With apologies, this survey is only available in English.

I invite you to review the letter of invitation that provides details on the survey and your participation.

Please click here to take the survey.

The survey will close on February 20, 2015 23:59EDT

This survey is being conducted as part of a PhD dissertation. Your contribution to this research is invaluable, and I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Mary Catharine Lennon  
PhD Candidate, Higher Education Leadership  
Higher and Adult Education  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto  
marycath.lennon@utoronto.ca  
416-624-6337

Please click here if you would like to be removed from the survey participation list
Appendix F: Survey letter of invitation

Learning outcomes are statements of what students are expected to know and be able to do at the end of an educational program. Many oversight and regulatory organisations have introduced learning outcomes (also called expectations, competencies, proficiencies, learning objectives, etc.) into their accountability, accreditation and quality assurance policies and frameworks.

This survey seeks information on the activities and policies of tertiary education quality assurance, oversight and regulatory organisations in developing, implementing, and assessing learning outcomes, as well as any research conducted on the impact of the work. This study looks at how learning outcomes are contributing to identifying and supporting quality in higher education around the world.

This survey could take up to 10 minutes to complete as you may be asked more specific questions depending on the type of work your organization conducts. The first section deals with the structure and function of your organization, the second requests information on your learning outcomes policies and framework documents, the third inquires about administrative issues, and the final section inquires about evaluations you may have conducted on your policies and activities. With apologies, this survey is only available in English.

Participation in the survey is voluntary. At any time you may choose not to answer a question or withdraw from the survey. Following your participation, if you decide to withdraw from the study please email me and I will destroy my notes and all data collected. You may withdraw at any time without consequence, penalty or judgment.

The participation of your organization will be recorded and made public in lists, tables and text. Your personal information is requested for administrative purposes only. Your personal identity will be removed from the data, kept confidential and not used in the final study, in future publications or presentations.

There are no risks associated with participation. At no time will you be judged, evaluated or at risk of harm. No value judgments will be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness in your organization or of the organization itself.

Upon completion of the study, you can have access to the final report which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection and which can be accessed electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository (TSpace) at https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944.

This study is carried out under the supervision of Professor Glen Jones, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study, or if you have any complaints or concerns about your treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics of the University of Toronto.

My contact information, that of my advisor and the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto is as follows:

Mary Catharine Lennon
marycath.lennon@utoronto.ca

Prof. Glen Jones
glen.jones@utoronto.ca

University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics
Ethics.review@utoronto.ca

By checking the box below you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study and that you are fully aware of the conditions above.

PLEASE PRINT/SAVE A COPY OF THIS LETTER FOR YOUR RECORDS