





Original Article

The Governance, Policy and Strategy of Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education

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Advancing the assessment of undergraduate and graduate student learning outcomes is essential for the future of higher education. After illustrating the value of this research area, this article examines contemporary limitations and the need for taking stock and charting promising directions. It introduces six papers which look at foundational issues, contexts, applications and implications. The article emphasizes the need for ongoing reviews in this field to clarify policy relevance and opportunities.

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A Field Taking Shape

The field of higher education learning outcomes assessment is young, vibrant and significant. Substantial work has been conducted over the last two decades. A global community of policymakers, university leaders and researchers has been energized. There is widespread recognition of the importance that reliable information on student learning outcomes carries for the future of higher education.

Despite such growth, this field itself has yet to realize its breakthrough moment and transform higher education. Around the world, governments and stakeholders remain reliant on information about admissions and graduation rates, which has limited relevance to student learning. Indeed, the promulgation of institutional rankings in the last two decades has focused its attention on bibliometric and reputational indices with tenuous relevance to education. Large-scale political and commercial attempts to assess and report student learning outcomes have failed to deliver generalizable insights or shifts in faculty practice (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2018; Wagenaar, 2019). Despite marked advances in assessment science, learning



technology and political economy of higher education itself, it remains common for students to be assessed using methods that remain basically unrefined since 1900.

This growing field remains in need of sustained development. Imagine higher education in 2030, perhaps with 400 million students engaged across 30,000 institutions globally (Calderon, 2018), with little information about graduate capability beyond qualification level and field. Such uncertainty is confusing for individuals, institutions and nations alike. Individuals would not have a clear sense of what they have learned, or how they compare to others. Even given whatever form of 'nano-micro' credentials or badges exist in 2030, institutions will find it increasingly challenging to service the dynamic and expanding knowledge and skill needs of industry and communities. Nations will lack even broad-brush information required to plan, fund and monitor skills strategies and workforce development.

Seemingly in response to such opportunity and challenge, a growing corpus of research has formed around this topic. Books, papers and an increasing number of dissertations have discussed the contexts that surround relevant endeavors, the definition of learning outcomes, leadership and management, the measurement of learning, and topics associated with reporting and broader policy analysis (Cantwell *et al.*, 2018). As with any emerging field, much of this literature has been exploratory and foundational in nature, seeking to establish a common language, identify salient issues, learn from failures, tease out useful perspectives and demarcate scope and key methodologies. After just a few decades, this work has produced a thriving knowledge base for this field of value to researchers, governments and practitioners.

The Value of Reviewing Progress

This Special Issue of Higher Education Policy was curated with the view that it is timely and helpful to step back and review the progress of this international work, and to identify fruitful directions for future progress. Given the growing global interest in the impact of research and policy, it is helpful to record insights from formative investigative inquiries which, combined, seek to establish the value and promise of this field. What has worked? What can be done differently? What perspectives and frameworks help shed light on the progress made to date and ensure the value of future developments? What broader insights are relevant to the governance, leadership and management of this area, and hence of higher education itself?

As guest editors, we planned this Special Issue of Higher Education Policy as an opportunity to conceptually and empirically take stock of the field and articulate feasible and valuable directions. The impetus and design flowed from each editor's profiles, experiences and editorial perspectives. Hamish undertakes institution and policy-level research on university leadership, academic work and student success

(e.g., Coates, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018; Coates and Richardson, 2012; Coates *et al.*, 2017; Kelly *et al.*, 2017). Olga leads research on modeling and measurement of student learning outcomes in higher education (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia and Pant, 2016; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia *et al.*, 2017a, b, 2018). Both editors share a commitment to advancing research that improves higher education outcomes first and foremost for the students.

There are many advantages to raising this topic within a Special Issue of Higher Education Policy. It is imperative that people actively engaged in forming and steering of higher education policy are aware of these core and emerging issues. While they cannot be expected to be experts, it is critical that university leaders have at least more than a superficial understanding of these important topics. It is vital the field is not framed, and to a certain extent ‘relegated’ to the internal world of the universities, lost in the weeds of myriad teaching and learning complexities. The topic touches diverse issues of keen interest to many stakeholders, including policy harmonization, funding, institutional development and political economy.

A Tour of the Papers

A suite of authors and papers was curated for this Special Issue. Deliberate efforts were made to call on authors diverse in terms of nationality, institution and experience. Paper topics were orchestrated with authors to yield complementary perspectives on the field. Together, the authors and papers provide a review of progress relevant to government and university leaders that document the value and impact of research to date, align distinct policy-relevant perspectives and extrapolate future research directions.

There are six papers. The first two look at foundational issues, the next three outline various contexts, and the final paper addresses broader implications for governance. Figure 1 conveys this logic, which helps frame the papers in this Special Issue and sets a perspective for a broader and more comprehensive future review.

In the first paper, Daniel Koretz discusses implications for postsecondary education of important issues that have arisen regarding K-12 testing in the USA. This perspective is important, particularly for people who work mainly in higher education. Testing has a much longer history in K-12 education and is more developed in this subsector. While there are all kinds of enormous differences between K-12 and higher education, many assessment methods and practices can

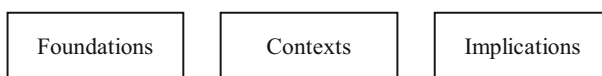


Figure 1. Frame for presentation of papers.



and need to be shared. Koretz analyzes complexities that arise during this process and contributes recommendations for productive and appropriate assessment in higher education.

In the next paper, Olga Troitschanskaia, Jasmin Schlaw, Judith Jitomirski, Roland Happ, Carla Kühling-Thees, Sebastian Brückner and Hans Anand Pant analyze a large-scale university assessment in Germany to articulate perspectives regarding ethics and fairness in learning outcomes assessment. All universities have assessment protocols, and while contexts vary enormously developed countries typically share a reasonably standard set of protocols regarding testing. But there can be quite a gap between these two protocols. Such complexity is problematic given the importance of fairness and integrity. Using their empirical analysis as a foundation, the researchers highlight particular challenges regarding admissions testing in higher education, such as how to ameliorate disadvantages experienced by various groups of students and ensure fairness and integrity. As higher education continues its trend of internationalization, such considerations assume major policy importance.

The first of the three contextually oriented papers looks at assessment of student learning in Chinese higher education. In China, the higher education sector has been grown and positioned as a major engine for nation building. In this context, the nature and quality of student and graduate outcomes matters enormously. In their paper, Fei Guo, Yan Luo, Lu Liu, Jinghuan Shi and Hamish Coates analyze the mechanisms being deployed to evaluate such outcomes. The paper concludes by observing China's progress in this field and considering the growing role of technology in future evaluation and policy development, including the growth of digital governance.

Next, Jillian Kinzie takes stock of assessment-based quality improvement initiatives in the USA. She surveys the underpinning accountability movement, looks at the main contributors and charts core facets of the unfinished research and reform agenda by drawing on national work, which plays a major role. Higher education is global, but the USA has pioneered much of the work in the field of assessment learning outcomes. Kinzie's article is an important primer for stakeholder with an interest in the recent history and current and potential state of play.

The third contextual paper by Gabriele Kaiser and Johannes König examines the matter of teacher education, a cornerstone of much of higher education and a topic of major policy relevance. In the knowledge society, the quality of teachers determines the quality of knowledge, which underpins broader prosperity. Accordingly, a reasonable number of studies and evaluations have sought to clarify this facet of higher education outcomes. The paper provides an overview of current insights, framing these in a conceptual framework and deriving implications for policy.

In the final paper, Ian Austin discusses the governance architectures that facilitate or arise from extra information in learning outcomes. Information on what students and graduates know and can do travels to the heart of higher education, carrying non-trivial implications for nearly all broader matters like policy, funding, performance and of course governance. The paper draws on the literature concerning governance and is helpfully theoretical in nature. It concludes that learning outcomes are a source of information for assessing institutional performance and are at the intersection of governance, policy and teaching.

Looking Ahead

The papers do not cover major and growing parts of global higher education, for instance in Africa, South America, Eurasia and the Middle East. However, the collection does not pretend to be exhaustive. Issues such as lifelong learning, micro-credentials and blockchain are touched on only glancingly. EdTech and online learning are noted but not addressed in the depth that denotes their policy relevance. The papers do highlight learning outcomes as a cross-cutting theme not just for research but also for governments and universities. A unifying theme among the papers is that it is early days for this field, and there is much more work to come.

Nonetheless, through their papers, the authors represented in this Special Issue make insightful and impactful contributions to the field of learning outcomes assessment in higher education. We are grateful to the authors for their contributions, to Jeroen Huisman for shepherding this contribution over 2 years, to the many experts who reviewed the submitted papers and to all other contributing individuals and institutions. The papers could be interesting to a wide range of readers and useful for progressing research and, most importantly, practice in this field. Such work is needed to advance higher education.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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