
THE CREATION OF THE EHEA, «LEARNING OUTCOMES» AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATIONAL CATEGORIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION*

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This article aims at contributing to the analysis of the reconfiguration of educational categories apparently taking place in the framework of the construction of the European Higher Education Area. As the concept of learning outcomes is assuming a central position in the dominant European pedagogic discourses, the formative role of knowledge is replaced by the ability to mobilize it individually and socially, i.e., by competences. One argues that the reconfiguration of educational categories articulates the change in the educational role attributed to knowledge in the context of the emerging European knowledge economy, challenging the educational debate about the meanings of teaching and learning in higher education and about higher education itself.

Keywords: learning outcomes, European Higher Education Area, educational categories

Introduction

The reference to «learning outcomes» as a central concept when setting out objectives for education in European countries must be understood, on the one hand, in the framework of the educational debate implicit in the shift from in-put centred learning processes to out-put centred learning processes and, on the other hand, more broadly, in the framework of the governance processes and instruments that are being developed to manage the European construction in the field of education. The educational debate cannot be reduced to a reflection of this political process but it cannot be fully understood without this very context. As the Bologna process is being

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implemented the change in the teaching and learning models in higher education must also be analysed under the framework of the goals and governance structures and processes adopted by the European Union (EU) to construct the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The move from the emphasis on knowledge as the basis of the pedagogic organization of teaching and learning to the emphasis on what a student knows and is able to do at the end of the learning process represents a shift in the educational perspective in European higher education systems and institutions. The emergent model develops around a set of concepts such as «learning-outcomes», «learner», «competences», «programme design», etc., that is changing the meaning of modern educational categories such as students, teachers, teaching, learning, etc. This model could be referred to as a new educational paradigm (Leney, Gordon & Adam, 2007), but educational paradigms and the pedagogic perspectives they legitimate – as they refer to the embracing social and economic systems, political system included – can only be understood within the overall environment within which they are initiated and developed.

This article aims at analysing the introduction of learning outcomes in higher education focusing on the educational dimension and on their impact as an instrument for the implementation of the EHEA. The paper starts by focusing on the creation of the EHEA and its stages of implementation and next on the educational content and possible educational impacts of using learning outcomes in higher education. Finally, the last section deals with risks and opportunities that the implementation of the teaching and learning approach based on learning outcomes brings about to the contemporary context of educational and institutional reconfiguration of higher education.

The creation of the EHEA

Formally, the establishment of the EHEA is the result of the signature of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 by 29 Ministers of Education. But one can trace back its origin in political perspectives on education developed in the framework of the construction of EU (Corbett, 2005). The goal of enhancing students' mobility, for instance, can be traced back to the Erasmus programme established by the European Council in 1987. In 1988, the Magna Charta, although it was not a EU initiative, was signed by the universities asserting basic principles of universities as knowledge-driven institutions and of their relationship with the states acknowledging the need to increase international cooperation. However, the political concept of EHEA was voiced out for the first time in the European Ministers Conference held in Warsaw in 1997 (Grilo, 2003). Also in 1997 the Lisbon Convention on Recognition of Qualifications gave an important political advance towards the creation of the EHEA as it recognised the need to develop further efforts in the processes of recognition of qualifications. In 1998, the ministers of Education of France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom signed the Sorbonne Declaration, asserting their commitment to the progressive conver-

gence of degrees and cycles of studies towards a common frame aiming at cross-national recognition, enhancing students' mobility and increasing their potential employability. It is of importance to stress that during at this stage the EU institutions were not, as such, involved in the process. The Bologna process was an intergovernmental initiative and the Commission was not allowed to formally subscribe the declaration because it was not supposed to be coined as a EU initiative.

The next stage, the 1999 Bologna Declaration was set up as a political declaration. In the words of the Portuguese Minister of Education who signed the document, it was «a purely political document within a consensus to face a European issue and a European objective already identified – the construction of a “knowledge society” enlarged to all European countries» (Grilo, 2003: 6). Aiming at convergence rather than harmonisation of European higher education systems, each country was held to develop the agenda and the implementation processes according to its context.

The third stage can be characterised by the shift from generic agenda setting and political statement to the emphasis on implementation. The 2001 Prague communiqué has included in the Bologna initial agenda objectives for lifelong learning, the participation of students and the promotion of attractiveness of EHEA via quality enhancement. In 2003, the Berlin communiqué has identified as a political priority to reinforce the implementation of the two-tier degree structure, the recognition mechanisms based on the *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System* (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement. In the 2005 Bergen meeting, while reaffirming the importance of the European Commission (EC) in supporting the reforms of degree structure and the ECTS, two crucial documents for strengthening European level policies were approved: the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA], 2005)¹ and the *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (Bologna Working Group, 2005). The former addressed quality assurance issues (both at European and national level), the latter points out the competences, the learning outcomes and the ECTS required to attain each of the three cycles. The European Commission was from then on a voting member of the Bologna Follow-up Group, side by side with the 45 countries already involved in the process. The increasing emphasis on the political implementation reached an important phase in 2007. In London 2007, the Ministers meeting has created a *Register of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies*, and

¹ At the Bergen Meeting Ministers have adopted the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA, as proposed by ENQA. These standards and guidelines were developed within the framework of a project involving ENQA, European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and European Students' Union (ESU). The Ministers meeting has decided to introduce the model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis. The principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review was also accepted. They also proposed that the practicalities of implementation were further developed by ENQA in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB (The National Unions of Students in Europe) with a report back to them through the Follow-up Group.

approved a strategy, *The European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting* (2007), that reaffirmed and enhanced the links between the EHEA and the goals of the Lisbon agenda. The Lisbon strategy was launched in 2000 aiming to reach the goal of Europe becoming by 2010 the «most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world» (Lisbon European Council, 2000: para. 6). The London communiqué (2007) reflected this goal by focusing on the political action on mobility, the social dimension, data collection, employability, and the implementation strategy in the global context (Veiga & Amaral, 2009). In 2009, in Leuven, the Ministers have traced the priorities for the next decade: a continuous focus on quality, the strategic valuation of diversity of higher education systems, the engagement in social cohesion and the emphasis on the need that «All students and staff of higher education institutions should be equipped to respond to the changing demands of the fast evolving society» (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009: 2). In Leuven, the mission of the universities in European societies has been refocused within the context of the knowledge economy: the EC «knowledge triangle» (education, research and innovation) explicitly assumed the front-stage of the Bologna process for the next ten years.

It is worth noting that the stocktaking exercises, promoted and funded by European Commission, were designed to monitor the implementation of the Bologna process in the signatory countries.

Therefore, the emphasis on the implementation of the Bologna process by the member-states and the increasing influence of the EU institutions it is to be understood in the framework of the Lisbon strategy and the EU need to coordinate the agenda on employment, economic development and social cohesion. The 2005 European Council has recognised that each member-state while keeping its diversity and priorities should develop their policies for growth and employment by developing reform programmes (European Commission, 2005: 3). But in spite of the emphasis on member-states specificities a governance model has been developed in the framework of Lisbon strategy. In 2003, the Bologna Follow-up Group underlined the growing impact of the European Council decisions:

Although the Bologna process was initiated as mainly an intergovernmental process, there is an evident and growing convergence with EU processes aimed at strengthening European co-operation in higher education. (...) At least from this point on, the Process was no longer merely a voluntary action for the EU Member States, or for the candidate Member States either. (Bologna Follow-up Group, 2003: 7)

European governance brought to the fore policy instruments that are important to understand the implementation of the Bologna process. These instruments include the use of benchmarks of performance and progress in member-states aiming at identifying the good practices to be emulated (Veiga & Amaral, 2009). Consequently, performance indicators became central devices for political monitoring of the process.

The Bologna process is being implemented on the basis of «soft law»², i.e., it is not based on legislation imposed on the member-states. This opens the way to interpretative nuances at national and institutional level leading to a complex type of convergence. The fact that the Bologna process was appropriated by the European Commission (Amaral & Neave, 2009) and implemented by means of «soft law» does not preclude that each country was allowed to decide how to fulfil the agreed objectives (*ibidem*). It was within this framework and by using the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) that «soft» instruments, such as the European Qualifications Framework, the National Qualifications Framework, the Tuning I and II projects, etc. were developed. Apparently, «soft law» and «soft instruments» enforce quite efficiently the European Commission objectives and mottos. Efficiency that can be seen not only in the way the forty-seven countries that presently are part of the Bologna process are moulding their higher education systems and institutions to improve the compatibility of their programmes and diplomas but also in the commitment taken to the process by higher education institutions across Europe.

Learning outcomes and higher education

The debate on educational concepts is re-emerging in the framework of the EHEA. From the analysis of the documents of the EU institutions one can learn that a central educational role is attributed to the concept of learning outcomes and to the competences students are supposed to demonstrate at the end of learning processes (Tuning, n.d.b: 1).

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a central political instrument to disseminate the educational change envisaged by the EU. The EQF aims to provide common reference levels on how to describe learning from basic skills up to the PhD level. The assumption is that:

In a few years from now, students, institutions, parents and employers in the wider Europe will be talking in terms of learning outcomes – what a graduate can actually do, at the end of his or her degree – and competences. This will certainly facilitate mobility and recognition across a wide variety of learning systems, as well as make our degrees more comprehensible for employers. (European Commission, 2005)

The European Parliament recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning clarifies the meaning of competence-based education:

² «Soft law», as opposed to «hard law», refers to *legal* instruments that are not legally binding. The concept of «soft law» was initially applied in international governance (e.g. United Nations, Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) but it was within EU that it has gained major visibility. EU uses soft law instruments to address areas that are under exclusive jurisdiction of member-states (e.g. education), shifting from the Community Method to political coordination based on negotiation. The Open Method of Coordination is a soft law instrument that aims at reaching goals that could not be reached via more conventional means and that are covered by the principle of subsidiarity.

«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. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy. (European Parliament, 2008: 4)

The shift from knowledge content as the organizer of teaching and learning processes to competence(s) as the capacity to mobilize knowledge(s) to know and to act professionally, individually and socially can be identified. The competences as the ability to mobilize knowledge, experience and skills were already emphasised as a central pedagogic concept, for instance by the Swiss sociologist Philippe Perrenoud who stated that «Competence is a surplus value added on to knowledges: the capacity to *use* knowledge to resolve problems, develop strategies, take decisions, act in the widest sense of the work» (emphasis by the author) (2001: 12-13). However, the emergent perspective on competences seems to move the role of knowledge from a formative process in itself based on the «traditional» approaches to subjects and mastery of their content to refocus the teaching and learning processes on what the learner achieves as the outcome of the learning process.

The Tuning project³ documents have identified three types of competences:

- Instrumental competences: cognitive abilities, methodological abilities, technological abilities and linguistic abilities;
- Interpersonal competences: individual abilities like social skills (social interaction and co-operation);
- Systemic competences: abilities and skills concerning whole systems (combination of understanding, sensibility and knowledge, prior acquisition of instrumental and interpersonal competencies required). (Tuning, n.d.b: 1)

The role of knowledge is mediated by competences and translated into learning outcomes, linking understanding, skills and abilities. The project Tuning I addressed the distinction between competences and learning outcomes by referring it to the «roles of the relevant players: academic staff and students/learners».

Desired learning outcomes of a process of learning are formulated by the academic staff, preferably involving student representatives in the process, on the basis of input of internal and external stakeholders. Competences are obtained or developed during the process of learning by the student/learner. In other words:

- Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of learning. They can refer to a single course unit or module or else to a

³ The Tuning project (TUNING Educational Structures) started in 2000. It aimed at linking the political objectives of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy to the higher education sector. Tuning focuses on educational structures and particularly on the content of studies. It is the direct effect of the political decision to converge the different national systems in Europe- (Tuning, n.d.c: 1).

period of studies, for example, a first or a second cycle programmes. Learning outcomes specify the requirements for award of credit.

- Competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities. Fostering competences is the object of educational programmes. Competences will be formed in various course units and assessed at different stages. (*ibidem*)

«Knowledge», «understanding», «skills» and «abilities» are the basic units that compose the competence-based and outcome-driven approach to teaching and learning. The issue of the content of knowledge is passed over and left aside as if the educational goal of competence building may be assigned without discussion about the necessity to develop procedural competencies based on content rather than what could be also designated teaching and learning styles. In fact, it might occur that the knowledge content carried out in the process of competence building is somehow neutralized in its educational role. The focus is on the mobilizing capacities as a central educational issue and goal which explains why the educational process is better conceived as based on learning outcomes.

In higher education, «where learning outcomes are considered as essential elements of ongoing reforms» (Commission of the European Communities, 2005: 8), there are not yet many data available on the implementation of competence-based perspectives in higher education and its educational impact.

But if it is too early to conclude about the real consequences on the students experiences of the so called «paradigm shift» brought about by the implementation of the learning outcome-based and competence-based educational approach in higher education, the analysis of the educational concepts seems to be an important starting point for the debate. The changes introduced in the educational concepts are so coherent that they actually suggest an emerging educational paradigm.

Learning outcomes and the emerging educational categories

The founding idea of modern Western higher education was based on the transforming potential of knowledge both at individual and social level (Barnett, 1997b; Magalhães, 2004). The educational categories (teaching, learning, students, professors, classes, etc.) were grounded on the formative role attributed to knowledge and so were the curricula and the teaching and learning processes. Reviewing educational concepts in the setting of the EHEA reveals an important reconfiguration of the educational role of knowledge. As argued, its formative role is replaced by the potential of mobilizing it to act individually and socially particularly in the world of work.

In the labour market, competences, set out as learning outcomes contents, are held to be the basis of «employability» and a common grammar for the use of higher education external stakeholders, namely for employers. As higher education institutions are assumed to be sensitive and

responsive to social and economic change, the need to design learning outcomes on the «basis of internal and external stakeholders» perceptions (Tuning, n.d.a: 1) and demands increases.

This context is framing relevant changes in the educational categories and consequently in education itself. As the meaning of the educational categories depend on the relationship they maintain with each other, changing one of them implies changing the all set they are part of. These potential (and some actual) transformations demand increased awareness by educational research as they drive not only important opportunities but also significant threats to educational processes.

The «student», as he/she occupies the centre of the educational process, might appear simultaneously as a «learner» of competences, as an «internal» stakeholder, a client of educational services and a person moving from education to the labour market (and vice-versa in a path without clear tracks). The professor rather than vanishing as an educational category (Nuyen, 1992) might be configured as a mere provider of learning opportunities and as an «instructional designer» (Cowen, 1996: 251). Illuminated by the emerging educational paradigm and pressured by the *diktat* of efficiency (achieving the maximum output using minimum input) in a context of mass higher education, he/she is not the «centre» of the flux and delivery of knowledge, responsible nevertheless for creating learning opportunities for «learners». Additionally, in the move from Mode 1 – based on the prevalence of theoretical knowledge – to Mode 2 – centred on knowledge in use – (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow, 1996) – and Mode 3 – focused on instructional work in universities⁴ (Rhoades, 2007) – research, while an educational instrument and as a structural function which shaped the institutional identity of universities, is being transformed. As learning outcomes are what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate on completion of learning, and given that they can be represented by indicators the assessment of the educational process moves from inside to outside higher education institutions and to the assessment by evaluatory technicians. Furthermore, the academics are giving up their own ultimate responsibility to exercise quality judgments on teaching and learning processes in favour of managerial expertise.

ICT (information and communications technology) instruments and ideographs enhanced the envisaged educational changes, being the lecture theatre as the educational locus par excellence increasingly less central. Classes are de-localized to the ether of www, being face-to-face teaching and learning a minor proportion of the «learner» activities. E-learning does not correspond to the

⁴ «Utilizing the vehicle of case analyses of technology-rich classes taught in public research university in the United States, I suggest there is an emergent pattern of what I am calling a “Mode III” organization of instructional work in universities. (...) Mode III refers partly to a pattern in which producing a course involves a matrix of professional, technical, and support personnel, as well as instructional infrastructure involved in supporting and delivering instruction» (Rhoades, 2007: 1).

«death» of the Professor but to his/her potential metamorphosis into a «learning monitor». The rise of virtual campuses introduce a new kind of academic life whose educational consequences are still to be identified.

It is important that the educational debate deals with these reconfigurations and the challenges they bring to higher education.

Risks and opportunities

Apparently, the competence-based and learner-centred emerging model has the educational potential foreseen by many educationalists (e.g. John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, among others) to deal with the needs of post-industrial societies and with new forms of citizenship. In the Draft Report on *Learning Outcomes*, Leney, Gordon and Adam (2007: 78) argue that

What can be referred to as a traditional 19th century paradigm developed to respond to the needs of industrial society (learning in one place, for given periods of time, the teacher in front of the class, etc.) is repeatedly called into question, especially given the increasing possibilities for individuals to learn when, where, how and what they wish. Learners increasingly make choices about different modes of delivery, not least through their own initiative in using e-learning facilities.

The alleged educational paradigm promises a lot: the empowerment of the student, the enhancement of his/her capacity and responsibility to express his/her difference, the enhancement of team work, mutual help, learning by doing, etc. The educational debates on the learning process, on the centrality of students in the learning process

are not calling on entirely new concepts or ideas, but technology, along with the associated changes in communication, acts as a catalyst, making change unavoidable and increasing the pace at which it takes place. Furthermore, what we learn has certainly become more problematic in late 20th and early 21st century. The increasing rate at which knowledge and information are expanding and the resultant escalating pace of curriculum change is forcing us to focus on what we need to include and what should be dropped from any syllabi. (*ibidem*)

The risk, it can be argued, is that knowledge by evolving away from a central formative *input* to a series of competencies which constitute the content of learning outcomes, may pass – like money (Bernstein, 1996) – through the individuals apparently without transforming them (Magaalhães & Stoer, 2003).

Formally, the Bologna process carries this paradigm forward, reshaping the meanings of higher education. As argued, the implementation of the Bologna process by means of «soft law» is expected to be a slow process as governments and institutions are reconfiguring their structures, processes and strategies to cope with the envisaged objectives. In the field of policy implementa-

tion studies both «top-downers» and «bottom-uppers» would converge in that initiatives aiming at changing higher education «private life» such as the teaching and learning processes need time to be developed. And

In each case, success has to be defined, and the impact analysis has to be multi-value and multi-perspective. Some of us would hate systems in which benchmarking and outcome measures, and the enterprise culture, were successful. But even by governmental instrumental criteria it will take decades to know whether value systems and practices have changed permanently and in the full range of subjects and institutions. (Kogan, 2005: 59)

Amaral and Veiga (2009), elaborating on a survey on the implementation of the Bologna process in Portugal, have identified that leaders of faculties and schools have nevertheless evaluated quite positively the process of definition of competencies associated with the study programs and with each curricular unit. This is in tune with the Ministry's progress report on the Bologna reforms and with the judgment of the Bologna Follow-up Group which scored Portugal «very good» on the implementation of the EQF. And the same goes to the evaluation that institutional leaders made about the curricular reform and its impact on students success. Despite the fact that there are signs that some universities have difficulties when using the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, and despite the oblivious attitude of Portuguese higher education towards the development of the National Qualifications Framework, the general idea is that national and European institutions tend to show a favourable picture of the policy implementation of the process in Portugal.

However, some problems emerge in the debate with regard to the reconfiguration of the teaching and learning processes on the basis of learning outcomes. In higher education, the assumption that «all qualifications can be described and assessed in terms of learning outcomes that are independent of the site, the form of provision and the type of pedagogy and curriculum through which they are achieved» (Young, 2003: 225) is far from being consensual. In Portugal – as in other countries (e.g., Philips, 2003) – concerns have been raised about a system based on common standards built across different educational levels, subjects, curricula, institutions, etc. The reasons for that are probably linked to the «traditional» elitism of Portuguese higher education (particularly in the university sector), but also probably linked to the fact that by easing the frontiers between the academic competencies and work competencies, between education and training higher education runs the risk of sacrificing too much to the gods of relevance and to the (short term) labour market needs. The contemporary labour market requires competencies that are supposed to be easily recognized by the employers and employees, among these competencies the potential of being continuously reformed is paramount. Bernstein (1996) called «trainability» this competence of constantly acquiring new competences. The educational risk is that of reducing the formation of the «critical self» of the student to the «corporate self» of the learner (Barnett, 1997a). On the other hand, the common standards traced upon the design of transparent and

comparable learning outcomes induce a considerable bureaucratic burden upon institutions and academics whose effects can hardly be expected to be positive.

Conclusion

During the last decade, several statements have been made about higher education's profound transformation. Barnett stressed that the university is dissolving both as an institutional unity and as the knowledge centre *par excellence*. He argued that institutions are dissolving into organizational segments and knowledge (with capital K) into knowledges (2000: 18). Cowen wrote about the «attenuation» (1996: 256) of the university at the level of space (via its international dimension and its connection to the economy); at the financial level (due to the increasing clientelisation of students and their families); at the pedagogical level (massification of higher education and teachers mutating into «instructional designers» – *ibidem*: 251); and in the quality domain (academics replaced by managerial expertise in quality judgements about the activities and outcomes carried out in institutions). Rothblatt (1995), in turn, pinpointed the «disappearing university» as university boundaries are becoming blurred. External frontiers disappear as university traditional functions are increasingly simulated by other organizations, for instance the awarding of degrees (which can be also awarded by business corporations) and developing research (which is also undertaken by non-university laboratories) as in US, China and Great Britain.

The Bologna process is being appropriated by the European Commission and implemented by means of «soft» law and «soft» instruments aiming at the fulfilment of political agendas focused on economic relevance and global competition. On the other hand, higher education «students» are moving from an educational pedagogical category to an inaggregate category to be dealt with by appropriate organizational subsystems while «professors» are reconfigured as «academic staff», whose educational performance is to be seized by measurable indicators. It is arguable that it is education itself that is being reconfigured in the whole process.

It is in these institutional and political contexts that the reconfiguration of the teaching and learning processes focused on learning outcomes gains critical features. These are challenges with which social, academic and political agencies must deal with. The risks identified above might also be opportunities. Barnett, commenting on the discourses on the dissolution of the university as the central higher education institution, assumes that it is possible to reclaim the university at various dimensions, and in that reclamation:

What is emerging (...), perhaps, is a glimpse of an «authentic university». Authenticity becomes possible precisely where authenticity is threatened. (...) The gaining of the authenticity too (...) is a set of creative acts, in which new pedagogies, new academic practices and new research approaches are painstakingly and painfully developed. (2004: 206)

In actual fact, both the political and pedagogic processes are developing logics and meanings whose closure is far from being accomplished. It is precisely in that open area that the debate on the characteristics of «authentic» higher education should take place.

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