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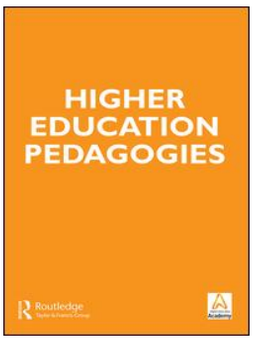

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Pain, gain – mission

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ABSTRACT

We present a short conceptual framework as an opinion piece for considering learning gain based on Biesta's three domains of educational purpose: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. We invite readers to reflect on the perspectives given in relation to different institutions mission statements around teaching and learning, and consider if the focus on developing methods for measuring learning gain is premature, given the lack of consensus regarding the nature of the learning to be measured.

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Learning gain can be considered in relation to various possible educational purposes (cf. Baume and others in this edition). In this piece, we propose that definitions of 'learning' can be informed by Biesta's (2015) three domains of educational purpose; qualification, socialisation and subjectification, and we show how these purposes are reflected in a sample of university mission statements. We invite consideration of how and why institutions might better state their missions in relation to the intended learning gain of their students, and how they might support their claims regarding the gains their students can expect to make. We conclude that the current UK focus on developing methods for measuring learning gain is premature, given the lack of consensus regarding the nature of the learning to be measured.

Biesta (2010) defines the qualification purpose of education as aiming to enable students to 'do' something, having armed them with a certain bag of skills and knowledge (cf. Boud on assessment of learning outcomes, this edition). This approach provides the rationale and economic arguments for state funding of higher education. He defines socialisation as being to do with 'the many ways in which, through education, we become part of particular social, cultural and political "orders"' (p. 20). Finally, he defines subjectification as '… the process of becoming a subject … It is precisely not about the insertion of newcomers into "existing" orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders …' (p. 21) (c.f. Neves and Stoakes in this edition regarding skills).

If an institution has a qualification-oriented mission, the measure of learning gain that might most closely match this mission is that of degree classification, certificating attainment in subject knowledge, skills and understanding, particularly where the subject is of a vocational nature and is accredited by a PRSB.[1] Alternatively, for a mission that supports

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subjectification, a focus may be placed on broad critical thinking gains (potentially measured using an instrument such as CLA+[2]), which may not involve disciplinary context. In the former case, gains (if they are made) in aspects of a student's development and disposition other than those related to qualification – for example in resilience or persistence (Claxton, 2014) – might be played down. This is a simplification for illustration and the QAA framework includes generic skills, such as critical thinking, within level descriptions (see also Boud in this edition).

In order to undertake a review of UK higher education institutions' mission statements, we identified an opportunity sample through a Google search for 'university mission statements UK'. Three brief examples illustrate our categorisation: qualification – 'deliver teaching and facilitate learning of the highest quality'; subjectification – 'the encouragement of a questioning spirit'; and socialisation – 'Enable adult students from diverse social and educational backgrounds to participate in our courses'.

Our analysis of 21 universities' mission statements is presented in Table 1. We have allocated each mission statement to one or more of the three Biesta categories.

This analysis suggests that some universities skate over questions of educational purpose in their mission statements, while others imply one or other (and in many cases poorly focused) educational priorities. This spectrum suggests that the sector includes a range of institutions that offer students choice in terms of how the institution sees and projects its educational mission.

Some broad mission statements cover all three categories '… higher education courses which meet the changing educational, cultural, personal and career needs of students of all ages …'. However, this example does not readily identify a specific niche or market segment for the institution. Does this make such broad statements meaningless? Would more focused statements be more useful for prospective students?

If a university promotes intended learning gain in a focused and specific way, could it be that this then influences the mission to reflect that specificity, or vice versa? How might a prospective student, or a member of staff, compare 'the institution for critical thinking' with 'the institution for employability', and make appropriate, informed decisions about where to study or work? Presumably, such institutions would have course offers that reflect market segment orientation as advocated in their mission statements. Arguably, we have simply identified liberal arts and applied institutions. This raises a range of questions, for example:

- what evidence can institutions provide to demonstrate that they deliver on the promises, both implicit and explicit, made in their mission statements?
- are the intended learning gains described in their mission statements demonstrably achieved by the majority of their students?
- what is the nature of the evidence?

Table 1. Analysis of university mission statements.

Biesta category of purpose	Number of statements
Qualification	4
Subjectification	6
Socialisation	1
Qualification + subjectification	1
Qualification + socialisation	0
Subjectification + socialisation	2
Qualification + subjectification + socialisation	4
No evident educational purpose	2

These issues are difficult to resolve as different measures proposed by HEFCE's ongoing learning gain programme[3] bleed across Biesta's categories, often with even less clarity than our sample universities' mission statements. What balance might be struck between the measurement of qualification and subjectification or between qualification and socialisation or subjectification and socialisation? Should institutions be compared using the same measure or should they be judged against the most suitable measure for their stated mission? Can different learning gain profiles be constructed so that institutions can be compared? With no dominant model of learning gain in the UK the issue is moot. We might even go further and argue that the HEFCE learning gain programme (HEFCE, 2017) needs to be further developed to resolve these issues. However, if learning gain becomes a way of ranking universities what will then happen, and will it be gamified at the expense of (say) subject content or broader socialisation?

Perhaps a consideration of what we mean by learning gain might be beneficial simply because it promotes debate around the very purpose of a university education in a twenty-first century world. Is learning gain the single narrow purpose of a university education (Collini, 2012). Regardless of this, it is certainly an urgent consideration given the HEFCE resource currently being invested in the development of learning gain measures in the UK.

Notes

1. Professional Regulatory and Statutory Body.
2. CLA+ is a discipline-neutral test that measures a student's critical thinking, problem solving, analytic reasoning, effective communication, scientific reasoning, quantitative reasoning and critical reading.
3. See HEFCE Learning gain Website http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/lg/.

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