



# Moving Beyond Anarchy to Build a New Field

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Around the world, trust in public institutions continues to decline. Election turnouts are falling, confidence in public offices is waning, and established social institutions are increasingly exposed to critique. There are signals, too, that trust in education institutions has suffered. So as higher education grows in significance it is imperative to ensure that stakeholders have confidence in the educational system. This goes to the need for transparent reporting of core processes and outcomes. While such reporting has evolved considerably in recent decades, the reporting of student learning outcomes continues to lag.

As NILOA's good work has shown, the assessment of higher education student learning is very important. Assessment provides essential assurance to a wide variety of stakeholders that people have attained various knowledge and skills, and that they are ready for employment or further study. More broadly, assessment results signal in a highly distilled way, the character of an institution and its educational programs. Much assessment is expensive, making it an important focus for reform. Assessment has the potential to shape educational programs and pedagogies and how people learn in direct and also indirect ways. Of course, assessment is highly relevant to individuals, often playing a major role in defining life chances and directions.

Given such significance, it is surprising that much assessment in higher education has not changed materially for a very long time, and that economically and technically unsustainable practice is rife. While there are, of course, an enormous number of innovative and high-quality developments, including those associated with technology advances, everyday around the world students still write exams using pen and paper, and sit in large halls at small desks in rows without talking. It is possible that this reflects the pinnacle of excellence. But given the lack of reflective technological advance over an extended period, this seems unlikely. Rather, given the enormous changes reshaping core facets of higher education, and pressures and prospects surrounding assessment, it is more likely that the 'transformational moment' has yet to come.

My recent book, *Higher Education Learning Outcomes Assessment*, portends that with the right investment and intellect, the assessment revolution may be closer than ever. Bringing together a decade of diverse work in the field, the book presents contemporary insights from over two-dozen leading researchers, surveys recent progress internationally, and clarifies prospects for further transformational advance.

The book unfolds in four parts. The first section focuses on planning, and explores changes in quality assurance, rationales for assessing learning outcomes, and pertinent intellectual and contextual complexities. Part two incorporates an eclectic selection of institutional, disciplinary and system-wide implementation case studies. Part three takes stock

# Viewpoint

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of progress, looking at the success of various assessment initiatives and the contribution of these initiatives to higher education. The final section embraces the most significant and challenging facet of this and perhaps any quality assurance effort — how to use assessment and reporting of student learning outcomes for monitoring, enhancement and improvement. Chapters in this last section re-assess the significance of this youthful field, and the role assessment can play in advancing higher education.

As many of the book's contributions affirm, defining and assessing learning outcomes is quite new and still relatively uncommon in many parts of the world and as such can prompt understandable fears and concerns. Yet definition and measurement is an important precondition for leading improvement. To help build international capacity in this area the book advances a series of perspectives that critical consumers should ask of proposed outcomes-related initiatives. Over the next few years we will see increasing research, discussion and activity around developing metrics of various persuasions for measuring the outcomes of university education. Done well, the specification and assessment of learning outcomes has the potential to work with other initiatives to support the next wave of educational reform and improvement. Done poorly, assessment efforts risk causing organizational and even systemic harm and confusion or, more likely, simply wasting time and money. The book is offered to help frame the development of policy and practice — to help systems, institutions, staff and students yield improved returns from their higher learning investments.

What, generally, is required to effectively grow the field? Five areas of focus are worth mentioning. First, effective academic leadership is a must — political provocation may be necessary as a bootstrap, but is unlikely to spur the substantial change required. Hence, postsecondary leaders must step up to govern and manage successful change.

Second, new work on learning outcomes must be well positioned. It must complement rather than substitute for academic practice, and strengthen existing professional and disciplinary initiatives.

Third, for people to have any confidence in data and results, assessment techniques must be sound.

Fourth, particularly given investment costs associated with exploratory ventures, projects must demonstrate impact and add value. Well-composed outcomes information has the potential to drive wide ranging forms of continuous improvement.

Fifth, it is imperative that learning outcomes work spurs innovation and diversity. Outcomes assessments should not encourage test-centric curricula, teaching or learning. It would be a retrograde step for educational excellence if an assessment constrained rather than promoted innovation in educational practice.

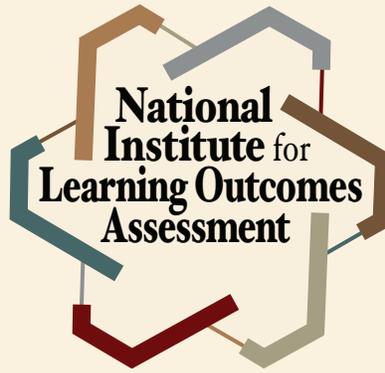
What, then, could be forecast about the nature and prospects of change? Meaningful change seems possible, but the work will be challenging, difficult to plan, take longer than expected, and happen in unforeseen ways. Building this core facet of education will yield unexpected outcomes. New institutional and knowledge partnerships will emerge, and higher education markets will change. The re-invigoration of learning will both provoke and require the adaptation of funding streams, and new indicators of progress will surely emerge. Sound change will require new organizing mechanisms. Though more could be said, these forecasts are sufficient to signal the extent of transformation required, some aspects of which are

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partly underway. This book reveals the vast capability and enormous energy that people have invested, and the likely continued progress over the next decade in the advancement of higher education learning outcomes.

## Reference

Coates, H. (2014). (Ed.) *Higher education learning outcomes assessment*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.



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