



Collaboration at the intersection of policy, practice, and professional identity: Governance and degree learning outcomes in four Swedish professional higher education programmes

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Abstract

This article examines how collaboration-related degree learning outcomes are interpreted, implemented, and assessed within four Swedish professional education programmes: the social work programme, the subject teacher programme, the special needs education programme, and the health care counselling programme. Drawing on neo-institutional theory and a governance perspective, the study analyses 30 semi-structured interviews with programme directors from 21 universities using qualitative content analysis. The findings show that collaboration is framed as a self-evident core competence but is translated differently across programmes. Three cross-cutting patterns emerge: (1) professional logics shape local interpretations, giving divergent meanings to similar outcomes; (2) organisational structures, such as timetables, course architecture, and placements, indirectly govern opportunities for collaboration; and (3) assessment practices often privilege reflection over action, shifting responsibility to supervisors in placement and field-based learning contexts. These patterns reveal how governance and professional logics jointly shape opportunities for students to develop collaborative competence. The study concludes that authentic, practice-based learning and assessment designs supported by coherent organisational and policy conditions are crucial for achieving functional equivalence across institutions. The results underline the need for policies and resource support that bridge the gap between formal outcomes and educational practice, creating equitable conditions for students' development of collaborative competence.

Keywords: collaboration, professional education, governance, neo-institutional theory, assessment, higher education, Sweden



Introduction

Contemporary welfare challenges are characterised by complex problems that require coordinated efforts across professions and organisations (Hall, 2002; Hood, 2012). International policy initiatives, such as UNESCO's work with Agenda 2030, highlight collaboration as a core competence for building sustainable welfare systems (UNESCO, 2017). In fields such as social work, education, and health care, collaboration has become an almost self-evident condition for meeting the needs of individuals and groups in an increasingly fragmented welfare landscape (Danermark & Kullberg, 1999). These demands have influenced not only professional practice, but also the formal regulation of professional education.

Professional higher education programmes, such as teacher education and social work, are often positioned at the intersection between higher education and vocational education and training (VET), as they combine academic education with preparation for specific professional fields and practice-based learning environments (Billett, 2011; Smeby & Sutphen, 2016). Understanding how collaboration-related competencies are translated into teaching and assessment in such programmes is therefore also relevant for research on VET, where similar challenges arise in aligning policy goals, workplace practices, and the assessment of professional competence.

In Sweden, national degree learning outcomes (DLOs) are legally regulated by the government through the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100), a binding and continuously revised statutory framework governing all higher education programmes. The Ordinance specifies nationally determined DLOs for each professional degree, including requirements for students in programmes such as the social work programme, the subject teacher programme, the special needs education programme, and the health care counselling programme to demonstrate knowledge of and competence in collaboration. These nationally regulated DLOs form local course and module objectives, where they are interpreted and operationalised within specific programme contexts.

This institutionalisation of collaboration in national DLOs, and its subsequent translation into programme-level teaching and assessment, reflects a broader international trend in higher education in which professional programmes are increasingly expected to prepare students to manage complex collaborative assignments in their future professions (Evans et al., 2024; Herrera-Pavo, 2021; Weiss et al., 2017). This article approaches collaboration as a pedagogical issue in higher education, focusing on the conditions of governance that influence how nationally regulated DLOs are translated into learning situations and assessment practices under organisational circumstances that shape what is actually possible to teach and assess for.

Despite this institutionalisation of collaboration in policy and degree frameworks, it remains far from clear how collaboration as a competence should be understood, taught, and assessed in higher education (Muukkonen et al., 2019). Similar questions have been raised within VET research regarding how complex professional competencies are defined, taught, and assessed across both educational and workplace contexts (Mulder, 2017). The concept encompasses several dimensions, ranging from practical skills in teamwork and coordination to the reflective capacity to analyse boundaries and power relations between professions. More specifically, in this article we use the term *collaboration* in a broad sense, as an umbrella concept that encompasses both practical cooperative skills and reflective dimensions of understanding and managing relationships between professions.

Within the field of professional studies, questions of *boundary work* and *professional identity* have been highlighted as central to understanding collaboration, including how practitioners position themselves and negotiate their mandates in relation to others (Bucher et al., 2016; Danermark & Germundsson, 2013; Wackerhausen, 2009).

Higher education research, in turn, has often focused on interprofessional learning (IPL), in which students from different programmes participate in joint teaching activities. Such initiatives have been shown to enhance students' understanding of other professions and contribute to the formation of professional identity (Powers & Kulkarni, 2022; Rubin et al., 2020). Examples include exercises in which students from various programmes practise professional roles in authentic patient scenarios (Banks et al., 2019). At the same time, there are evident organisational and pedagogical barriers to consistent implementation (Pettersson & Fredriksson, 2026). This study therefore extends beyond specific IPL activities to examine how DLOs regarding collaboration are translated and enacted in teaching and assessment when they encounter professional logics and governance conditions.

Despite strong policy pressure and a growing body of research, little is known about how collaboration-related DLOs are addressed in professional education outside the field of health care. Previous studies have mainly focused on health-care education (e.g., Lapkin et al., 2013; van Diggele et al., 2020), examining interprofessional learning initiatives within medicine, nursing, and allied health professions. These studies have often centred on short-term educational interventions or student perceptions of teamwork skills. While this research has provided valuable insights into the design of interprofessional learning environments, it tends to conceptualise collaboration primarily as a pedagogical technique rather than a governance issue that shapes programme structures and assessment practices. Research on programmes in social work and education remains limited (e.g., Accardo et al., 2020; Kallio et al., 2023; Murray-Harvey et

al., 2013). Consequently, little is known about how collaboration is translated and operationalised in other professional fields, or how institutional governance frameworks condition what can be taught and assessed.

This study contributes to the research on professional education and VET in three ways. Firstly, it broadens existing knowledge by comparing professional education programmes outside the field of health care. Secondly, it explores how collaborative competence is constructed in educational practice, often within a context of tension between the self-evident and the elusive in teaching and assessment. Thirdly, the study explains this variation by linking local translations to governance conditions. To illuminate these dynamics, four programmes are analysed: the social work programme, the subject teacher programme, the special needs education programme, and the health care counselling programme. This selection is analytically strategic, being designed to capture variation across professional domains and qualification levels: two are within social work (social work and health care counselling) and two within education (subject education and special needs education); and two are at undergraduate level and two at postgraduate level. This combination enables the comparison of how professional logics and organisational conditions shape the interpretation, implementation, and assessment of collaboration outcomes.

Recent research on VET in the Nordic countries highlights similar tensions between policy ambitions and everyday educational practice, including how reflective routines often dominate the assessment of complex professional competencies (Gustavsson, 2024; Messina Dahlberg & Gustavsson, 2024). Although the study is situated in the context of Swedish higher education, the programmes analysed have several features in common with VET contexts, such as practice-based learning, professional competence development, and the difficulty of assessing complex workplace-related skills (Mulder, 2017). The study therefore contributes to VET research by showing how collaboration-related learning outcomes are locally interpreted, enacted, and assessed in different organisational and professional conditions across educational and workplace settings.

The aim of the study is to analyse how DLOs regarding collaboration are interpreted, implemented, and assessed in four Swedish professional education programmes, and to explore how professional logics and indirect governance enable or limit the pedagogical possibilities for practice-based learning and equitable assessment across institutions. The study draws on interviews with programme directors and addresses the following research question:

- In what ways do collaboration-related DLOs govern educational practice in four Swedish professional programmes through interpretation, implementation, and assessment?

Theoretical framework

The study combines a *neo-institutional perspective* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) with a *governance perspective* (Ball, 2003; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013; Rose, 1999) in order to analyse how DLOs regarding collaboration are interpreted, implemented, and assessed in four Swedish professional education programmes.

Neo-institutional theory is used to understand how higher education balances between academic norms, professional demands, and state steering mechanisms (cf. Krücken & Meier, 2006). It offers a framework for analysing how educational programmes operate within an institutional landscape shaped by both formal regulatory documents, such as the Higher Education Ordinance, and informal norms and expectations from the state, professions, and labour market (cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A key assumption is that educational programmes, treated here as organisations in the neo-institutional sense, strive for legitimacy by adapting to external demands, yet this adaptation is rarely direct or unambiguous. Instead, a process of *translation* occurs, whereby national policy formulations are reinterpreted in light of local traditions, resources, and profession-specific cultures (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008).

This perspective is particularly relevant for the four programmes examined here, which operate at the intersection of distinct institutional logics. Teacher education and special needs education are shaped by the normative and collegial traditions of the educational system, whereas social work and health care counselling are influenced by the *professional logic* of social work, and, in the latter case, by the governance ideals of the health-care sector. The neo-institutional perspective thus enables an analysis of how these different logics of governance – academic, professional, and administrative – affect the interpretation, translation, and enactment of collaboration-related DLOs in educational practice.

We also draw on the concepts of *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) – to capture how similar policy formulations can generate surface-level similarities between programmes despite divergent practices – and *ceremonial compliance* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) – to describe situations where organisations formally adapt to external demands to maintain legitimacy without necessarily changing their actual practices.

Depending on professional mandates and programme orientations, collaboration outcomes may to varying degrees align with existing educational logics (cf. Smeby & Sutphen, 2016). For example, these logics may define collaboration as a practical skill closely linked to professional identity, or as a more theoretical component weakly anchored in teaching and assessment. The neo-institutional perspective allows analysis of how such variations arise in the encounter between policy requirements and local educational practices. A central notion here is that of *decoupling* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), which refers to how formal policies, such

as those set out in course syllabi, may coexist with practices that do not necessarily reflect them. This has clear parallels with educational research that distinguishes between formulated, enacted, and experienced curricula to highlight gaps between policy and practice (Solbrekke et al., 2020).

In this context, we also employ the concept of professional logics as a sensitising concept for capturing how norms, epistemic claims, and organisational conditions structure professional practices and collaborative assignments (cf. Bucher et al., 2016; Danermark & Germundsson, 2013; Wackerhausen, 2009). By 'professional logic' we do not mean a fixed typology, but rather an analytical lens for understanding how similar policy requirements can take on different meanings in different educational contexts. The concept is linked to questions of professional identity and knowledge forms, making it possible to analyse variation without presupposing it.

In parallel, a governance perspective is used to illuminate how collaboration-related DLOs function as tools of governance (Ball, 2003; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013). Governance refers here to the broad spectrum of steering mechanisms that shape higher and professional education in which legal requirements interact with quality assurance, resource allocation, and organisational structures (Braun et al., 2011; Neave & van Vught, 1991). Ball (2003) emphasises performative governance, whereby accountability demands, indicators, and assessment practices create pressure to move towards what is measurable – potentially reshaping teaching and assessment without necessarily strengthening actual professional capability. Rose (1999) highlights how governance can also operate through the delegation of responsibility to individual actors, who then bear the consequences of policy demands in practice. In line with this, Braun et al. (2011) have developed the concept of *policy enactment*, by which policy is understood not as linearly implemented but as locally translated and realised through negotiation, resources, and organisational conditions. This perspective helps reveal variations in enactment. Accordingly, in this study, the chain leading from DLOs to course and module objectives is also viewed as a governance chain, in which policy is translated and responsibility is distributed locally.

Within this governance context, professional education emerges not only as an arena for knowledge transmission, but also as a site where state, professional, and labour market demands are negotiated, interpreted, and translated into educational practice. The concept of *boundary work* is also relevant here (Bucher et al., 2016; Gieryn, 1983). We use this idea as a sensitising analytical tool to describe the processes by which professional boundaries and mandates are established, maintained, and renegotiated in relation to other professions. This may involve delineating professional expertise, as well as negotiating responsibilities and forms of collaboration in concrete practices. In this study, however, boundary work is not analysed as a phenomenon in itself. Instead, the

concept is used to interpret how collaboration-related DLOs acquire practical meaning when enacted in local educational contexts. In this way, boundary work complements the concepts of professional logic and translation, and helps reveal the processes of negotiation through which responsibilities and mandates are shaped at the intersection of policy and practice. One consequence of such boundary work may be the shifting of responsibility to local actors, such as teachers, course coordinators, and supervisors in school- or field-based settings, who then take on the practical responsibility for realising policy demands (cf. Ball, 2003).

Combining a neo-institutional perspective with a governance perspective allows us to analyse both the overarching logics of governance and the local translation practices through which collaboration acquires meaning, value, and function. By *translation practices*, we mean the concrete ways in which policy requirements are reinterpreted within educational practice. This term is closely related to interpretive practices, but we consistently use 'translation' to emphasise its theoretical lineage. This combination of perspectives makes it possible to identify the tensions that arise between formal requirements and actual practice – where practice is understood not as passive implementation, but as the outcome of professional and pedagogical choices within given governance conditions – and to explain why similar policy formulations take on different meanings in different educational contexts.

Method

The study is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with programme directors from the four selected Swedish professional education programmes. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow participants to describe and reflect – in their own words – on how collaboration-related DLOs are understood, enacted, and assessed within their respective programmes (cf. Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This approach provides both a degree of comparability across interviews and the openness needed to capture nuances and complexities in how these outcomes are interpreted and managed in different organisational and institutional contexts.

A total of 30 interviews were conducted between May and December 2024 (see Table 1 for an overview of the sample). All programme directors (n = 60) were contacted via email, with reminders being sent in cases of non-response. Those who declined participation primarily cited workload or having recently assumed their position. The 30 participants thus represent half of all programme directors across 21 universities of varying sizes and locations. Nine of these were from the social work programmes (out of 19; 11 originally accepted, but two cancelled), five from the health care counselling programmes (out of six), ten from the

subject teacher programmes (out of 25), and six from the special needs education programmes (out of ten). The sample thus retained the variation in qualification levels described above, allowing potential level differences to be observed, although this was not the primary focus of the study.

Table 1. Distribution of programme directors and interviews across the four programmes.

Programme	Total programme directors nationally	Participants (n)	Response rate (%)	Programme level
Subject teacher education	25	10	40%	Undergraduate
Social work	19	9	47%	Undergraduate
Special needs education	10	6	60%	Postgraduate
Health care counselling	6	5	83%	Postgraduate
Total	60	30	50%	-

Throughout the article, the term *programme director* is used, regardless of the role's formal designation at each university. Typically, this role involves coordinating courses within the programme and ensuring academic content and quality. Responsibility for managing personnel may vary and was not the focus here. One methodological consideration concerns the decision to interview programme directors rather than teachers or supervisors, who directly interpret, implement, and assess the DLOs in everyday practice. This can be regarded as a limitation, since the perspectives of programme directors primarily reflect the organisational and strategic level. At the same time, they occupy key positions for coordinating courses and maintaining programme quality, which makes their viewpoint particularly relevant to the purpose of the study. This assessment is reinforced by the fact that all interviewees had personal experience of teaching within their programmes. To strengthen the study's credibility, all participants received the interview questions in advance, allowing them to prepare their responses. While the results are based on the perspectives of the programme directors, they should be understood as the researchers' interpretations and analyses of these accounts.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They were conducted individually by the authors, who divided them roughly equally and used a semi-structured interview guide. If one author had a closer collegial relationship with a particular participant, then the other author conducted the interview. The guide included questions concerning the interpretation, implementation, and assess-

ment of collaboration-related DLOs, while also allowing for follow-up questions and an open conversational climate (cf. Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). All interviews were conducted in Swedish, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The interview excerpts presented in the findings were translated into English by the authors.

The material was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Graneheim et al., 2017), combining both manifest and latent levels of interpretation. The manifest analysis focused on explicit content, while the latent analysis – guided by neo-institutional theory and governance perspectives – interpreted underlying meanings, such as how collaboration was presented as self-evident, challenging, or policy-driven. Although the interview guide was structured around questions of interpretation, implementation, and the assessment of collaboration outcomes, these questions should not be conflated with the analytical themes that emerged during the analysis. The interview questions served to structure the conversations, whereas the themes were developed inductively from the data and represent a higher level of theoretical abstraction.

The analysis followed Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) four-step model. Firstly, all transcripts were read by both authors to gain an overall understanding. Secondly, meaning units were identified and condensed while preserving their core content. Thirdly, these units were coded and organised into categories linked to the research questions. In the final and fourth step, the categories were analysed at a higher level of abstraction, using neo-institutional and governance theory as analytical tools.

Throughout this process, the substantive categories and themes presented in the results section were developed. The term *content* is used to indicate the study's connection to qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), whereas *themes* refers to a higher level of interpretation, linking the findings to neo-institutional theory and concepts of governance. Accordingly, the results section presents both the substantive categories identified at the manifest level and the themes developed at the latent level. The analysis combined an inductive approach in the initial stages with theoretically informed interpretation in the later stages, ensuring that theory did not prematurely shape the data.

As both authors are active within the Swedish higher education sector, we are familiar with the educational context. This brought both advantages and potential challenges. One advantage was the insight we had into the organisational conditions that shape professional education, which facilitated the interpretation of the interview material. However, our positions as researchers within the same sector may also have led participants to perceive us as colleagues, potentially granting us access to contextual information beyond the interview situation. We addressed this risk through reflexive awareness and by

excluding from the analysis any information not collected during the interviews. Coding and interpretations were jointly reviewed by both authors to minimise subjective bias and ensure that ethical considerations were central throughout the analytical process.

The study forms part of a larger project that was judged not to require ethical review by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2024-02454-01) and it adheres to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2024). Participation was voluntary, and all programme directors were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential treatment of their data. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. To protect participant anonymity, all quotations have been anonymised and coded.

Findings

DLOs in higher education steer both the direction and evaluation of professional programmes. To frame the analysis that follows, we first provide an overview of how collaboration-related outcomes are formulated in the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) for the four programmes under study. Across programmes, these outcomes repeatedly emphasise students' ability to collaborate in different ways, such as through professional conduct, teamwork, cooperation with other occupational groups, and the planning, implementation, and evaluation of collaborative interventions. Although the exact wording varies between programmes, both understanding and practical capacity for action in complex contexts are foregrounded. Table 2 presents the collaboration-related DLOs as formulated in the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100). In the Ordinance, each programme includes three such outcomes, which are reproduced in the table.

In the subject teacher programme, collaboration is primarily tied to pedagogical settings. Students are expected to identify pupils' needs for special educational support and, working with others, to plan, deliver, and evaluate lessons. An interprofessional perspective is not made explicit, however; instead, collaboration is mainly understood within the school's internal organisation.

In the social work programme, by contrast, the outcomes stress insight into teamwork and cooperation with other professional groups. Students are to demonstrate both an understanding of, and the practical capacity to conduct, social work in collaboration, but the goals are formulated in a fairly general way, leaving significant room for interpretation regarding how collaborative competence should be understood and developed.

Table 2. Collaboration-related degree learning outcomes in the four programmes.

Degree learning outcomes – Subject teacher education	Degree learning outcomes – Social work	Degree learning outcomes – Special needs education	Degree learning outcomes – Health care counselling
“Demonstrate the ability to adopt a professional approach and manner”	“Demonstrate insight into the importance of teamwork and collaboration with other professional groups”	“Demonstrate insight into the importance of teamwork and collaboration with other professional groups”	“Demonstrate the ability to engage in teamwork and collaborate with other professional groups”
“Demonstrate the ability to identify, and in collaboration with others, address pupils’ needs for special educational support”	“Demonstrate such skills and abilities as are required to carry out social work at different levels in society, in collaboration with the individuals concerned”	“Demonstrate the ability to design and participate in the work of action programmes in collaboration with relevant actors”	“Demonstrate the ability, independently and in collaboration with patients and their relatives, to plan, carry out, and evaluate social and psychosocial interventions at individual and group level”
“Demonstrate the ability to plan, carry out, evaluate, and develop teaching and other educational activities independently and together with others, with the aim of optimally stimulating each pupil’s learning and development”	“Demonstrate the ability to adopt a professional approach and manner”	“Demonstrate advanced ability to act as a qualified conversation partner and advisor on educational issues to colleagues, parents, and others concerned”	“Demonstrate the ability to adopt a professional approach and manner in relation to patients and their relatives”

In the special needs education programme, collaboration is linked in particular to working with action plans and to the role of a qualified conversation partner and advisor on pedagogical matters. Here, collaboration appears primarily to serve a consultative function within existing school structures, rather than representing interprofessional collaboration in a broader sense.

The health care counselling programme is decidedly more action-based. Students must demonstrate an ability to work in teams and collaborate with other

professional groups and independently plan, implement, and evaluate interventions in collaboration with patients and relatives. Collaboration is thus presented as a competence that is actively practised in clinical environments, in clear contrast to the more understanding-oriented outcomes in the other programmes.

This overview serves as background information. In the following sections, we analyse how collaboration outcomes are interpreted, enacted, and assessed within the four programmes. The results are presented in the same order as in Table 1 and 2: the subject teacher programme, the social work programme, the special needs education programme, and the health care counselling programme. The substantive categories and themes reported below emerged through a stepwise qualitative content analysis of the interview material. As described above, the material was first organised into categories through manifest analysis, followed by a latent interpretation in which neo-institutional theory and governance perspectives were used to discern patterns in the programme directors' accounts. The quotations in the results section were selected to illustrate the analytical themes identified.

Interpreting collaboration-related degree learning outcomes

In this section, we use a neo-institutional lens to analyse how collaboration-related outcomes – which are set out in the Higher Education Ordinance, but differ in phrasing and concreteness across programmes – are rendered meaningful within the four programmes. As defined above, we draw on the notions of translation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), loose coupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), professional logics (Bucher et al., 2016; Wackerhausen, 2009), boundary work (Bucher et al., 2016; Gieryn, 1983), and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to capture how policy acquires local meaning. These concepts allow us to analyse both the distance between policy and practice and the ways in which professional logics and institutional norms shape the interpretation of collaboration outcomes. The tension between collaboration as a taken-for-granted practice and as an explicit policy formulation becomes particularly salient here.

In teacher education, collaboration is mainly interpreted as collaboration within the school setting in which teachers practice their profession. The outcomes are perceived as unclear: 'The goals are perhaps not always super clear. Some goals include some kind of collaboration, but it may not be explicitly expressed.' Collaboration thus appears to be more of an implicit precondition than an explicit goal: 'I don't see any – if we're talking about collaboration with actors outside the school.' In sum, collaboration is described as something that is taken for granted in school practice, rather than as a competence to be defined or developed through policy. This reading can be understood through the notion of professional logic (cf. Bucher et al., 2016; Wackerhausen, 2009) as follows: the

teaching profession is strongly embedded in the school's organisational structures, and the outcomes therefore reinforce established, 'self-evident' practices rather than introducing new expectations.

In social work education, the material conveys the view that collaboration is self-evident for the profession, yet the phrasing of the outcomes generates uncertainty. As one director puts it: 'They do more than demonstrate insight; [it depends on] what you put into the concepts of collaboration and teamwork. That may be what causes problems.' The formulation 'demonstrate insight' is seen as particularly challenging: 'It is very difficult to assess something called insight. How can one show that a student has insight?' Collaboration accordingly risks being reduced to a symbolic marker rather than an operative tool. At the same time, the mere existence of the outcomes is regarded as an institutional reminder: 'I almost think it would be easy to lose sight of it, if it weren't explicitly written.'

This indicates that outcomes function primarily as means of legitimization rather than guidance. They uphold a shared rhetoric, but are translated into local practices without being fundamentally changed, exemplifying loose coupling and ceremonial compliance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

In special needs education, collaboration is more explicitly tied to professional identity. Programme directors state that 'almost everything the special educator does is done in collaboration with others.' Collaboration is seen as both a practical skill and a professional stance, yet tensions between cooperation and independence are emphasised: 'The degree ordinance puts strong emphasis on cooperation and collaboration with other professional groups. But it also stresses independence.'

Another layer of complexity emerges from the differences between courses: 'I'd say it depends on who the course coordinator is. Unfortunately.' Thus, a great deal hinges on local interpretations and priorities rather than on the literal wording of the outcomes. From a neo-institutional perspective, this can also be understood as a condition for translation. Relatively open policy formulations thus enable programmes to reinterpret collaboration outcomes in ways that align with local professional logics and organisational conditions.

Taken together, these examples indicate a duality. Collaboration is a recurring element of the special educator's work, yet it is continually negotiated in relation to the requirement for independence and, in practice, between course coordinators. Boundary work (Bucher et al., 2016) is key to understanding this dynamic; the outcomes become an arena where the profession's boundaries are drawn, negotiated, and at times redefined, both in relation to other professions and within the programme itself.

In health care counselling, collaboration acquires a distinctly practical meaning. Formulations such as 'demonstrate the ability to work in teams and collaborate with other professional groups' make the outcomes concrete and

assessable: 'It is not enough to display insight; here, it is the ability that should be assessed, and which we also assess very clearly.' Collaboration is likewise viewed as a core professional competence: 'I would say they are incredibly central and important, and that is essentially what it is all about.'

This shows how the outcomes have a direct, practical significance in this context, rather than a symbolic function. They are closely aligned with the established logic of health care, where interprofessional teamwork is taken for granted as a mode of working. This is an instance of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), whereby education internalises the institutional norms of the field and renders policy requirements self-evident and operative. In this case, the strong alignment between professional practice and educational objectives means that collaboration outcomes in teaching and assessment are easier to operationalise than in programmes where such alignment is weaker and translation processes are more extensive.

Across the four programmes, three recurring patterns can be discerned in how collaboration outcomes are interpreted. At the manifest level these concern differences in expression and focus. At a latent level they can be read as themes that illuminate broader institutional patterns. They are as follows:

1. Local translations shaped by professional logics. Outcomes are given meaning in relation to each profession's core remit. In teacher education, collaboration is interpreted almost exclusively within school structures. In social work, it is seen as self-evident yet difficult to operationalise. In special needs education, it is identity-bearing yet continuously negotiated in relation to independence. In health care counselling, it is an operational core competence.
2. Semantic uncertainty and loose coupling. Phrases such as 'demonstrate insight' create interpretive problems – most clearly in social work – leading to uncertainty regarding what is actually to be assessed. Outcomes thereby tend to serve legitimating rather than guidance functions.
3. Boundary work and professional identity. In special needs education in particular, collaboration outcomes become an arena for negotiating the relationship between independence and cooperation. However, in teacher education and health care counselling, collaboration is also used to demarcate what belongs to the profession.

In sum, interpretation is primarily shaped by professional logics and identity work, rather than by the literal wording of the outcomes. Policy texts thus do not steer practice uniformly; rather, they function as a shared rhetorical frame within which divergent practices emerge through an interplay of translation, loose coupling, and, in the case of health care counselling, isomorphism – whereby similar formulations conceal substantial differences in practical meaning.

Implementation of the collaboration-related degree learning outcomes

While the interpretation of the DLOs is shaped by professional logics and loose coupling, this section highlights how their implementation is shaped by governance processes. The analysis explores how resources, organisation, and shifts in responsibility influence what becomes practically possible, and how the absence of clearly institutionalised structures can lead to person-dependent solutions and local priorities. Implementation is therefore not simply a straightforward translation of the wording of the DLOs, but rather the result of a complex process of interpretation and enactment, in which policy requirements encounter organisational and contextual conditions. Indirect governance (Ball, 2003) is a particularly useful concept here, revealing how timetabling, course and programme architecture, and placement organisation indirectly shape the conditions for collaboration.

In teacher education, school-based placements emerge as the main arena for collaboration, alongside project-based activities and guest lectures. However, collaboration is primarily understood in terms of the logic of the school: 'If we're talking about collaboration within a school, with other teachers and colleagues, then we can see it in our placement courses.' This suggests that collaboration is largely confined to existing structures within the school, rather than extending to encounters with other professions. Efforts to introduce interprofessional elements are repeatedly hindered by logistical and organisational barriers. As one programme director noted, 'There are a lot of logistical issues [around teacher education] – just fitting it into the timetable for 18 subjects.' This makes it clear that the limitation is not one of reluctance, but of organisational conditions. It illustrates how faculty structures and programme organisation function as governance instruments that indirectly limit opportunities to realise collaboration.

In social work education, collaboration likewise occurs mainly through placements, practice-based tasks, and guest lectures: 'It's implemented most clearly in semester four, before and during placement.' As in teacher education, it is during placements that collaboration becomes most tangible. Yet several directors stressed that this work is highly dependent on individual commitment: 'Much of this, when it comes to teaching, unfortunately becomes quite person-dependent'. This indicates that implementation is often mediated by individual engagement, local pedagogical priorities, and organisational conditions. From a governance perspective, the absence of strongly institutionalised structures means that collaboration is realised through the initiatives of course coordinators and teachers, which may both enable adaptation to professional practice and generate variation across programmes and institutions. Attempts to establish more consistent interprofessional arrangements, such as joint courses with police or psychology programmes, were described as difficult to organise: 'We really tried

to include collaboration in the learning outcomes [...] but it was so hard to organise.' This illustrates how organisational and resource-related conditions effectively set the boundaries for collaboration more than the formal policy texts do.

In special needs education, collaboration is more continuously integrated, for example through joint courses with special needs teachers, mentoring groups, and guest lectures: 'You could say that in the first year we work with [the DLOs] to some extent, but we go more deeply into them in the second year of the programme.' Thus, collaboration is embedded in the programme structure in a progressive fashion. However, barriers linked to course coordinators' priorities are evident: 'It's difficult to get course coordinators to understand the importance of collaborating with another profession during the programme.' This highlights how implementation largely depends on local priorities. The governance dimension is apparent here: although the outcomes are nationally defined, their practical implementation is decided by individual coordinators. This exemplifies the type of responsabilisation and local enactment described by Ball (2003), whereby responsibility is transferred from central policy texts to local actors.

In the health care counselling programme, collaboration is integrated in the most consistent and concrete way. Students engage in case-based exercises, interprofessional encounters, and placements. One example is 'IPL Stroke Day', where different student groups meet online. Here, the collaboration assumes a clear and practical form, already at the education stage. At the same time, variation between universities is evident: some programmes incorporate collaboration into all courses, while others rely mainly on placements. 'We don't have a separate placement course in our programme. Instead, placements are integrated across the five courses we have.' This shows that even within one programme, differences in course structure and faculty affiliation can create different conditions. These variations illustrate how organisational models act as indirect governance, with local structures determining how collaboration is realised in practice despite similarly formulated DLOs. Overall, the implementation phase highlights the tension between reflection (in campus-based teaching) and action (in placements or other authentic learning environments).

Recurring patterns emerge across the four programmes in how collaboration outcomes are enacted in practice. At the manifest level, three categories can be distinguished which, at the latent level, can be understood as themes reflecting broader governance patterns:

1. Dependence on resources. Collaborative elements are primarily realised in programmes where time, staff, and partners are available. In teacher and social work education, this is especially evident during placements, where opportunities for collaboration vary according to supervisors' engagement and the local conditions of schools or social service agencies.

Where resources are lacking, collaboration becomes sporadic and dependent on individual champions.

2. Organisation as indirect governance. Timetabling, course and programme structures, and faculty boundaries function as governance mechanisms that indirectly determine what is possible. This can be seen in the complex organisation of subjects in teacher education and in special needs education's reliance on the priorities of individual course coordinators. The institutional setting also matters. Which other professional programmes exist on campus, and how they are coordinated, strongly influences the conditions for interprofessional learning.
3. Shifts of responsibility in implementation. Implementation is frequently delegated to placement contexts, supervisors, and course coordinators, a pattern that can be understood in terms of policy enactment and responsabilisation. This generates variation across both programmes and universities. The differences between health care counselling programmes, ranging from fully integrated collaboration in every course to a model where collaboration mainly occurs during placements, demonstrate how local decisions transfer responsibility from central policy to individual actors.

In sum, implementation is not a direct translation of the formal DLOs; rather, it is shaped through governance processes in which resources, organisation, and local priorities play a decisive role (cf. Ball, 2003; Braun et al., 2011). From a governance perspective, a duality becomes apparent: national policy texts provide a shared framework, but are locally enacted and sometimes loosely coupled in practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Similar formulations in the Higher Education Ordinance can therefore result in outcomes ranging from fully integrated activities, as in health care counselling, to sporadic, person-dependent ones, as in social work. This raises questions of equivalence and the reach of governance in professional education (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), revealing the tension between top-down regulation and the professional logics that shape local translations.

Assessment of the collaboration-related degree learning outcomes

This section analyses how collaboration-related DLOs are examined and assessed within the four programmes. Drawing on neo-institutional and governance perspectives, we explore how the policy requirement for students to 'demonstrate the ability to collaborate' is enacted in different assessment practices. Using the concepts of loose coupling and ceremonial compliance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), we show how formal outcomes are translated into assessment formats that to varying degrees test students' actual capacity for action. At the same time, we

use the concept of responsibilisation (Ball, 2003) to reveal how the responsibility for assessment is often delegated to supervisors in placement or field-based environments. Overall, the analysis focuses on the tension between policy demands centred on ability and organisational and didactic conditions that lead to collaboration primarily being examined in terms of insight.

Reflection and theoretical tasks dominate in teacher education, along with assessment during placements. One director explained: 'They have to produce a digital teaching resource as a group. Of course, that presupposes that the collaboration within the group works.' In this case, collaboration primarily serves as a means of completing other tasks, rather than being assessed in its own right. It is also rarely examined as a distinct competence: 'I don't think there's anything that's actually assessed.' Instead, evaluation is delegated to placement supervisors: 'With such an assignment, you can assess their ability to reflect on their own abilities. But testing the abilities themselves – that has to be done in the school.'

Thus, collaboration in teacher education is mainly assessed indirectly and, in effect, is transferred to placement contexts. It is difficult to design authentic assessments within the university framework that mirror the collaborative situations that students will encounter in their future professional practice. Limited resources, requirements for fairness and standardisation, and course structures all contribute to this, as do didactic choices, such as prioritising reflection and theoretical understanding over action-based testing. This exemplifies how governance conditions interact with professional considerations, resulting in collaboration often being assessed through reflection rather than through practice.

In social work education, assessment typically takes the form of reflective case analyses, seminars, and written exams: 'It's assessed through seminars [...] But sometimes there can be a written or take-home exam where you ask questions about the literature.' Here, collaboration is evaluated through students' reasoning about the concept rather than through their demonstrated ability. Programme directors expressed concern about this: 'Not all students will necessarily be in a placement where they collaborate, for example.'

These accounts indicate a recurring transfer of responsibility, where the concrete assessment of collaborative ability is left to placement supervisors and local practice settings. This can result in variation in assessment practices across placement sites. While such variation may reduce comparability, it may also reflect adaptation to the specific conditions of professional practice in different settings. From a neo-institutional perspective, such variation can be understood as a form of local translation of relatively abstract policy formulations (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). From a governance perspective, this represents a form of performative governance (Ball, 2003); the assessment formally fulfils policy requirements, but the practical evaluation is delegated to local actors.

In special needs education, collaboration is assessed primarily through case-based assignments, seminars, and written reports. One programme director described the difficulty of demonstrating ability: 'You have to do it by describing what you think you would do, in speech during seminars, and in writing [...] But I think it's really difficult to see exactly how students show their ability, even though that's what we're assessing.'

Here, the discrepancy between the wording of the outcomes and the practical assessment is particularly apparent. It is the students' accounts of intended actions that are assessed, not the actions themselves. This can be understood as a form of ceremonial compliance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where assessment appears to fulfil the requirement to test ability, but in practice actually measures insight. Collaboration thus risks becoming a symbolic rather than an operational competence within the programme.

In health care counselling, role-playing, interactive exercises, and placement assessments are all used: 'We assess them partly through take-home exams, but also through interactive exercises and role-playing.' Unlike the other programmes, collaboration is assessed here through activities that more directly reflect professional practice. Nevertheless, frustration is expressed over limited resources and available methods: 'To assess each of my students' ability for teamwork and collaboration - I can't do that [...] we don't have very good assessment formats for it.' This demonstrates that, even where the professional logic makes collaboration crucial, there is a lingering tension between ambition and feasibility. Governance requirements related to fairness and standardisation limit the possibility of conducting genuinely practice-based assessments.

Assessment formats that are used to evaluate collaboration-related outcomes vary across the four programmes, but several recurring patterns can be identified. These patterns highlight the challenges involved in assessing complex professional competencies within educational programmes (cf. Messina Dahlberg & Gustavsson, 2024; Mulder, 2017). At the manifest level, three substantive categories can be distinguished. At the latent level, these can be read as themes illuminating broader patterns in how collaboration is tested for and assessed:

1. Reflection on action. Collaboration is most often assessed through written or oral reflection. In teacher and social work education, this is done through case assignments and take-home exams; in special needs education, it is done through case tasks and seminars. These forms of examination assess students' understanding, but rarely their actual ability to collaborate.
2. Shifting responsibility to placements. In both teacher and social work education, the assessment of collaborative ability is effectively delegated to supervisors in placement settings. This provides students with authentic opportunities to demonstrate their skills, but also produces

variation across sites, undermining consistency and equivalence in assessment.

3. Insight versus ability – the gap between policy and practice. Although the DLOs specify that students should demonstrate ability, in practice they often only demonstrate insight. This is most evident in special needs education, where students describe what they would do rather than showing what they can do. However, similar patterns appear in the other programmes, albeit less pronouncedly.

Overall, these themes show that assessment practices are shaped at the intersection of pedagogical considerations, institutional frameworks, and professional logics. Differences between programmes reflect both educational level and local governance conditions: at postgraduate level, collaboration is assessed somewhat more through action-based tasks, whereas undergraduate programmes focus more on reflective understanding. However, this is not a strict divide; it varies according to the established logic of each profession and the organisational constraints that define what is practically feasible.

From a governance perspective, the gap between policy and educational practice can be understood as a manifestation of policy enactment (Braun et al., 2011) and performative governance (Ball, 2003): national requirements are translated locally in ways that make them manageable, but that also alter their meaning. Consequently, ability often becomes synonymous with insight. The result is that similar DLOs lead to divergent assessment practices, ranging from the more authentic exercises in health care counselling to the indirect, reflective forms in the other programmes, highlighting the tension between reflection as the dominant mode of assessment and action as something rarely tested directly.

Discussion

This study examined how collaboration-related degree learning outcomes are interpreted, implemented, and assessed in four Swedish professional education programmes: the social work programme, the subject teacher programme, the special needs education programme, and the health care counselling programme. Drawing on neo-institutional theory and a governance perspective, the findings show how collaboration-related outcomes are translated through professional logics and organisational conditions within these programmes. The study contributes to VET research and scholarship on professional education by broadening the perspective beyond health-care education, showing how collaboration-related outcomes can appear both self-evident and difficult to operationalise in educational practice, and explaining why their meaning and implementation vary across programmes. In contrast to previous research on interprofessional learning, which has largely focused on health and medical

education where collaboration is already institutionalised (e.g., Banks et al., 2019; Lapkin et al., 2013; van Diggele et al., 2020), the findings show that similar policy ambitions take different forms in fields where collaboration is less embedded in professional routines. The findings further suggest that professional logics and governance arrangements shape what is possible to teach, practise, and assess. Similar dynamics have been reported in Nordic VET research, where collaboration between teachers and researchers is influenced by organisational arrangements and local conditions (Gustavsson, 2024).

From a neo-institutional perspective, the variation observed across programmes can be interpreted as an effect of translation processes, whereby relatively abstract policy formulations are interpreted in relation to professional logics and organisational conditions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). This suggests that variation should not necessarily be interpreted as a failure of implementation, but rather can be seen as a consequence of how programmes translate policy requirements into local educational practices. The seemingly self-evident rhetoric of collaboration reflects established professional logics, but it becomes more difficult to operationalise when such logics encounter demands for formalisation and assessment within higher education governance structures.

Three mechanisms emerge as central to explaining this variation. Firstly, professional logics act as interpretive filters. When collaboration aligns closely with the profession's core remit, it becomes operational and assessable; when it does not, however, it is reduced to rhetoric or reflection. Secondly, organisational structures function as a form of indirect governance, with timetables, programme architecture, and placement structures determining what can actually be done. Finally, the wording of the outcomes creates directional effects. Formulations such as 'demonstrate insight' invite reasoning, whereas 'demonstrate ability' requires arenas and resources for action-based testing. Together, these mechanisms contribute to the risk of uneven assessment of collaboration across universities and practice sites, even when the formal outcomes are similar.

What distinguishes this study from earlier work is that it not only identifies variation, but also explains it by linking differences in interpretation, implementation, and assessment to the combined effects of professional logics, organisational governance, and the wording of outcomes. This analytical integration of neo-institutional and governance perspectives provides a new lens for understanding how collaboration as a competence is shaped through translation rather than simple implementation.

This creates a tension that cannot be resolved by either increased regulation or greater autonomy. While it is relatively easy to standardise reflection and ensure fairness, action is more profession-oriented, as well as being more resource-intensive and difficult to calibrate. Our results thus point to a logic of balance

rather than a simple solution. If the language of outcomes continues to oscillate between *insight* and *ability*, this oscillation must be intentional and transparent. The question to ask is: When should collaboration be demonstrated through action, when should it be assessed, and what minimum levels of support and organisational coordination are needed to make such assessment feasible? In practice, the issue is less about *adding more collaboration*, and more about using a didactic and organisational design that creates small but recurring opportunities for students to *practise* collaboration in ways that are also assessable. Such an approach can complement large, resource-intensive initiatives while reducing the gap between intended outcomes and actual practice. This tension between reflection and action also resonates with findings in VET research, where reflective formats often dominate the assessment of complex professional competencies (Messina Dahlberg & Gustavsson, 2024; Mulder, 2017).

From a governance perspective, the implications involve reducing loose coupling by developing clearer criteria for when ability should be assessed in action, and by supporting the development of indicators that capture observable collaborative behaviours, such as common problem definitions and cross-professional coordination. This in turn requires organisational conditions such as timetable coordination, shared spaces, and supervisor calibration that make such assessments possible. At programme level, alignment between outcomes, teaching, and assessment is essential. If the degree learning outcome requires demonstrated ability, students must also be given opportunities to practise it.

In this context, equivalence should be understood as functional rather than formal. Local variation in design is not problematic in itself, but it becomes so when students are assessed on non-comparable grounds. A reasonable aim, therefore, is to ensure *functional equivalence*, so that students, regardless of where they are studying, have comparable opportunities to demonstrate collaborative ability at some point during their education. Such assessments should be supported by simple yet transparent indicators and basic calibrations. Achieving this requires less new documentation and more coordinated organisation and pedagogical design.

From a higher education pedagogy perspective, the findings have direct implications for students' opportunities to develop collaborative competence. When collaboration is primarily treated as an object of reflection rather than an action-based practice, students develop theoretical understanding but not practical capability. The findings suggest that collaboration is more likely to become part of professional development when teaching and assessment formats allow students to interact, make group decisions, and negotiate responsibilities in authentic situations. Such arrangements enable policy to be translated into practice and reveal how organisational conditions concretely affect students' opportunities to develop the competence that is formally required.

The study has certain limitations. The material mainly reflects the organisational and strategic level through the perspectives of programme directors, and does not capture in detail how collaboration is taught and assessed in classrooms, seminars, or practice environments. Future research should therefore include course coordinators, supervisors, and students, and, where possible, direct observations of teaching and assessment. Comparative studies of institutions with different organisational conditions could further clarify how forms of indirect governance, such as timetabling and programme architecture, affect opportunities for practice-based assessment.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that collaboration in professional education is shaped more by programme design and organisational conditions than by curriculum content. The programme directors' accounts indicate that students' opportunities to practise collaboration depend on how learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment formats are organised within programmes. When these elements are aligned, collaboration appears more likely to be addressed as a form of professional practice, and not just a topic for reflection.

More concretely, this may involve assessing collaborative competence through teaching and assessment designs that combine reflection and action. Structured role-playing or scenario-based exercises with clear assessment criteria can make visible how students coordinate and negotiate responsibility. Short inter-professional case seminars and shared calibration among placement supervisors can further enhance equivalence and create authentic spaces in which collaboration is actually practised rather than merely discussed.

At a broader level, this study illustrates how governance and pedagogy are mutually constitutive in professional education. Policy creates the pedagogical conditions for learning, while pedagogical practices translate and reshape policy in action. It is in this interplay between the logic of governance and the didactic design of education that students' opportunities to develop collaborative competence are formed. Together, the study demonstrates how governance, organisation, and pedagogy jointly shape collaborative competence, and how similarly formulated policy texts are translated locally into divergent forms of professional learning.

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