

## Concept paper<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Background to the workshop

The International Workshop aims to draw on lessons from current work conducted by Cedefop and other research and international organisations on the implications of learning outcome approaches to the design and implementation of curriculum and assessment policies and practices.

This is the continuation of two annual events organized by Cedefop in 2009 and 2011 summarised in Cedefop's Briefing Note *"When defining learning outcomes in curricula, every learner matters"*<sup>2</sup> and a research paper published in 2010 on *"Learning outcome approaches in VET curricula: a comparative analysis of nine European countries"*<sup>3</sup>. This study has been now expanded in all 32 countries participating in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020")<sup>4</sup>. This research is part of a larger analytical work undertaken by Cedefop over the last few years focusing on learning outcome approaches in vocational education and training to design and describe qualifications, to set standards and to influence quality assurance, validation and certification approaches.

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<sup>1</sup>Irene Psifidou and Slava Pevec Grm, Cedefop experts have drafted this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/18079.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Available at: [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5506\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5506_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The 32 countries covered by the study are as follows: 27 EU Member States; EEA countries: Iceland, Norway, Lichtenstein; and Candidate countries: Turkey and Croatia.

## 2. Objectives

The Workshop aims to bring together national experts (researchers, government advisers, policy makers, social partners, practitioners) from around 30 different European countries and representatives of international organisations actively involved in curriculum development and assessment policies and practices for learners, to:

- Present and discuss developments, reforms and European trends on VET curriculum and assessment policies using the learning outcomes approach;
- Examine the potentials and limitations of learning outcome-based approaches to curriculum development and learner' assessment;
- Compare methods and tools used in developing VET curricula based on learning outcomes and creating effective assessment for learners;
- Debate on how curriculum and assessment practices can improve learning outcomes in vocational education and training;
- Identify needs for future research.

These insights and the conclusions drawn from the Workshop will contribute to two Cedefop's on-going comparative studies on "*European policies and practices in designing and delivering outcome-oriented curricula in VET*"<sup>5</sup> and "*Assessing learning outcomes in VET*"<sup>6</sup>.

## 3. Organisation of the workshop

The workshop is organised in the form of plenary and parallel working sessions using an interactive approach.

### The first day

The plenary session of the first day aims to present and discuss the findings of the two above mentioned Cedefop comparative studies. Participants will have the opportunity to learn among other about curriculum reforms in Europe; how new curricula are designed; which stakeholders are involved; what are the aims and focus of new curricula; and how these are being delivered in different learning environments. Furthermore, participants will learn how learners are assessed on the

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<sup>5</sup> The Centre for Education and Industry from Warwick University in collaboration with the Centre for Organisational and Human Resources Research (COHRR) at the University of Ljubljana, and subcontractors are conducting the research under Cedefop contract: AO/ECVL/IPS/Curricula Study/016/10.

<sup>6</sup> European Profiles in collaboration with VDI/VDE Innovation + Technik GmbH and IST College – University of Hertfordshire, and subcontractors are conducting the research under Cedefop contract: 2010-0157/AO/ECVL/SPEV/Assessing Learning Outcomes/018/10.

basis of these new curricula; which assessment methods are more in use in Europe; and what challenges still persist for assessing effectively learning outcomes. Developments in two sectors - tourism and electronics - will be analysed in greater detail.

Among the research questions to be addressed and debated are the following:

- Up to what extent initial VET curriculum policies in the 32 countries under examination consider/introduce outcome-oriented approaches? What is the rationale behind these reforms?
- What are the implications of these reforms for the decision-making and curriculum development processes?
- Which are the main similarities and differences on the implications of outcome-oriented approaches to curriculum development processes between different countries and sectors examined?
- What are the implications of recent curriculum reforms to learners' assessment and up to what extent European countries revise their assessment strategies, methods and approach in the light of learning outcomes approaches?

Two parallel sessions will follow, giving the opportunity to participants to learn from different national cases and draw on lessons for policy development and implementation.

### **Session 1. Ensuring links between curriculum and assessment policies and practices**

It is widely acknowledged that curriculum reform demands the alignment of learners' assessment frameworks and methods. On the other hand, assessment practices can exert powerful influence on teaching, on the taught curriculum and on education and training institutions ethos and organisation. There is an inevitable tendency to devalue any learning objectives (or learning outcomes) which are difficult to assess by the methods currently available<sup>7</sup>. As the way curriculum has been designed and is being taught interacts with assessment policies and practices, curriculum reforms should not be seen in isolation from assessment policies.

In most European countries, assessment has traditionally been an integral element of training and education, thus dependent on its institutional structure<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, the learning outcome-

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<sup>7</sup>Psifidou, I. (2012). Curriculum development and learner assessment: Seamless or inconsistent VET policies? Paper to be presented in XXV CESE Conference: "Empires, Post-coloniality and Interculturality: Comparative Education between Past, Post, and Present", 18-21 June 2012, Salamanca, Spain.

<sup>8</sup> Cedefop. (2012). Assessing Learning Outcomes in VET. Research Paper. Forthcoming.

based European qualifications framework (EQF) and national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) that are related to it create basic conditions for carrying out assessment independently from the ways learning takes place, including the assessment of non-formal and informal learning. It is no longer self-evident that assessment is based on predefined ways of learning in an institutional context. Nevertheless, this does not make it necessary to consider learning outcome-oriented curricula separately from learning outcome-oriented assessment. On the contrary, it is not only the traditional link between curricula and assessment that makes this sensible, but changes in the function of assessment. The shift from summative to formative assessment, although not yet observable as a general trend creates a new link between curricula and assessment. Furthermore, as Cedefop's research shows, learning-outcomes-based standards are increasingly becoming the basis for curriculum development and assessment<sup>9</sup>.

In standard-based vocational education and training systems alignment of standards, curricula and assessment is the key to achieve better learning results<sup>10</sup>. Research into skills and roles on the labour market and also consultation with all relevant stakeholders inform standards in VET (e.g. occupational, qualification and education standards). These define learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) students are expected to achieve at the end of the learning process. These learning outcomes are then translated into learning and teaching objectives, activities and norms that guide teachers, schools and assessors. In order to assess whether students have achieved intended learning outcomes, the assessment should focus on learning outcomes defined in the standards. Sound assessment methodologies are needed to assess a broad range of objectives and learning outcomes in a valid and reliable way and useful for different stakeholders. According to international research<sup>11</sup> and also supported by current Cedefop's studies, the following aspects seem to attract special policy attention:

First, to find a balance between teachers' assessments and external assessment approaches and strategies; second, to integrate formative class-room assessment, which is regarded an integral part of teaching and learning processes within broader assessment frameworks; and thirdly, to overcome the weaknesses of current assessment methodologies and practises (e.g. performance-based assessment, standardised tests, etc.).

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<sup>9</sup>Cedefop. (2009). Dynamics of qualifications: defining and renewing occupational and educational standards. Available from internet [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5195\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5195_en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See also OECD. (2011). Evaluation and assessment frameworks for improving school outcomes. Common policy challenges. Summary. Available from Internet <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/43/25/46927511.pdf>, p. 3

<sup>11</sup>See Looney, J.W. (2011). Integrating Formative and Summative Assessment: Progress towards a Seamless System? OECD Education Working Papers. No 58. OECD Publishing. Available from Internet <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kghx3kbl734-en>

Looney, J.W. (2011). Alignment in Complex Education Systems: Achieving balance and coherence. OECD Education Working Papers. No 64, OECD Publishing. Available from Internet: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kg3vg5lx8r8-en>

OECD. (2011). Evaluation and assessment frameworks for improving school outcomes. Common policy challenges. Summary. Available from Internet <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/43/25/46927511.pdf>, p. 3

Learning outcomes are defined at different levels and for different purposes. Shared understanding of learning outcomes<sup>12</sup> and competences to be achieved plays the central role in providing coherence and consistency among standards, curricula and assessment. Aligning different elements is an iterative and balancing process, which takes into account input and interests from different stakeholders, demands for assessment to be reliable and valid to be trusted as well as existing education and training structures.

Bearing these points in mind, the aim of this working session is to explore:

- How may alignment of standards, curricula and assessment be ensured?
- Which strategies are used to achieve coherence and balance among different stages, policy documents and stakeholders involved?
- How learning outcomes are used to better articulate these links?
- What is the relationship between indented learning outcomes described in curricula and assessed learning outcomes included in learners' assessment?
- What are the implications of learning outcomes approaches to learner's assessment? Are there any changes in formative and summative assessment of learners and how they interrelate?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses when linking curriculum with assessment policies and practises? Which challenges still need to be addressed?
- In what ways do outcome-oriented curricula and new assessment methods benefit individual learners? Is there any evidence?

Participants will learn from the case studies of Germany and the Netherlands. Following the presentations of the two country case studies, participants will continue the discussion in two round tables to examine how each particular case is similar or different from their own country's approach and how curriculum and assessment policies should complement each other to benefit learners.

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<sup>12</sup> According to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), learning outcomes are defined as "statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence".

## **Session 2. Improving teaching, learning and assessment**

The existing evidence of Cedefop work on curriculum reforms undertaken in Europe suggests that curricula in initial vocational education and training are being revised during the last 5-10 years to respond to the diverse needs of learners and the labour market<sup>13</sup>. New curricula are broader emphasising learning outcomes valuable for work and social life. Research points that curricula based on learning outcomes can increase learner motivation, raise participation rates and help prevent early school leaving. They can also forge stronger links between theoretical and practical learning and help improve learners' prospects on the labour market<sup>14</sup>. However, there are certain conditions that need to be met for curriculum reforms to be successful and have positive impact on learners. Two important requirements to be discussed in this session is first, the teaching methods used to teach new curricula, and second, the adjustment of learners' assessment to the new outcome-oriented focus of curricula by applying appropriate methods and tools for assessing learning.

Evidence gathered within Cedefop's study on outcome-oriented curricula in nine European countries<sup>15</sup> shows that half of them introduce curriculum provisions concerning teaching methods and learning arrangements (e.g., how to organise learning environments, learning materials to be used). In the other countries, new curricula do not identify teaching methods and learning arrangements, but curriculum support materials developed for teachers and trainers to describe approaches to teaching. In all cases, there are encouragements for changing teaching and learning methods. Despite whether curricula prescribe or not the teaching methods and the degree of teacher autonomy, more active-learning, learner-centred approaches are promoted in the official documents. This reflects the increasing popularity of constructivist teaching and learning forms in the last years<sup>16</sup>. However, it is one thing for documents to encourage change and other for teachers and learners to alter how they act in classrooms and other learning contexts.

The relationship between the written and the taught curriculum depends on a number of factors, including the professional experience of the teacher, the way the learning environment is set, the characteristics and needs of the learners, the available (financial) resources and infrastructures, the institutional particularities, the teacher's degree of autonomy, as well as teacher's attitudes. Thus, a written curriculum, which focuses on learning outcomes and emphasises active-learning, learner-

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<sup>13</sup> Cedefop. (2012). European policies and practices in designing and delivering outcome-oriented curricula in VET. Research Paper. Forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>15</sup> See also footnote 2. The nine countries examined are: France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, UK (Scotland) and, within each country, one particular learning programme in initial VET on the sector of Logistics was analysed in-depth.

<sup>16</sup> Based on the on-going Cedefop study on 32 European countries, although many of them are perusing policies associated with learner-centred pedagogies, these are not explicitly associated, at policy level, with learning outcomes-oriented curricula. The relationship between the introduction of outcomes-oriented curricula and learner-centred pedagogies will be further explored in Cedefop's research work.

centred methods centred to learners' needs, may not necessarily be taught in this way. Furthermore, the way curricula are structured and the ways learning outcomes are formulated have different effects upon pedagogy, for example, very detailed learning outcomes may lead to instrumental approach to training. Therefore, in studying the impact of VET curricular reform, one needs to examine not only the written curriculum but also the taught curriculum, in order to avoid mistaking "motion masquerading as progress"<sup>17</sup>.

Bearing these points in mind, the aim of this working session is to explore the conditions for successful delivery and assessment of learning outcomes-based curricula. In particular, participants will examine:

- How do learning outcomes-based curricula affect teaching and learning? How to support what's positive about the influence of learning outcomes on curricula and assessment and counter the negative at national and EU levels?
- Which are the teaching methods used to deliver outcome-based curricula?
- How the learning environments are organised? How balance between theory and practice and linking school and workplace learning is ensured?
- How is assessment of learners organised to support learning? Which strategies are used to link formative and summative assessments?
- How teachers and schools are best supported to apply innovative teaching and assessment methods?
- In what ways individual learners are benefitted? Is there any evidence?

Participants will learn from the case studies of Finland and Greece. Following the presentations of the two country case studies, participants will continue discussion in two round tables to examine how each particular case is similar or different from their own country's approach and how curriculum and assessment policies should complement each other to benefit learners.

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<sup>17</sup>Psfidou, I. (2012). "Empowering Teachers to Focus on the Learner: The Role of Outcome-Oriented Curricula in six European countries". Paper presented at the XIV World Congress of Comparative Education Societies, Istanbul, 14-18 June 2010. Forthcoming In Mark Ginsburg, ed. (2012). *Preparation, Practice, and Politics of Teachers: Problems and Prospects in Comparative Perspective*. Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, Netherlands.

## **The second day**

The second day of the workshop will be devoted to a worldwide perspective to curriculum and assessment innovation and reform.

Representatives from International Organisations will present developments in different regions of the world, including Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America and Australia, providing evidence on:

- How can curriculum and assessment policies strengthen each other?
- How can curriculum and assessment policies work together more effectively to improve learning outcomes in vocational education and training?

National experts acting as Discussants will provide national insights into worldwide developments and lessons learned for policy and practice.

Participants will have the opportunity to consult all presentations given and the conclusions of this event upon its completion on the workshop website:

<http://events.cedefop.europa.eu/curriculum-innovation-2012/>