The shift to learning outcomes; rhetoric or reality?

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Shaping VET

Cedefop

- looks into the future of VET
- monitors VET policy developments across the EU
- actively supports the development and use of European tools, such as the European qualifications framework
The 2017 and 2022 European handbooks – reinforced messages

- The shift to learning outcomes has gained speed
- The learning outcomes approach is generally accepted and adopted across Europe – its application varies significantly
- The policy impact of learning outcomes makes it increasingly important to focus on strengths as well as weaknesses
- More than before a need to provide practical guidance based on mutual learning and systematic research
The (critical) learning outcomes feed-back-loop

**Intended learning outcomes**

A learning outcome is a statement of what a learner is **expected** to know, be able to do and understand after having completed a learning process.

**Achieved learning outcomes**

Set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to **demonstrate** after completion of a learning process.

Learning outcomes state what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand at the end of a learning process or sequence.
Terminological model on transversal skills and competences

Source: European Commission and Cedefop, 2021
Purposes of learning outcomes

**QUALIFICATIONS**
Learning outcomes play a crucial role in defining qualifications framework levels, enhancing transparency and enabling cross-country comparison. To avoid limiting autonomy and facilitate effective interaction with diverse users and systems, balancing specificity and generality is essential.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES**
Learning outcomes influence teaching methods, learning environments and assessment practices.

**ASSESSMENT**
Assessment specifications detail criteria for evaluations, providing precise requirements for learners. These criteria, using learning outcomes statements, are often formulated as threshold levels which must be met by the candidate, they indicate how a learning experience is to be graded, indicating how learning can be achieved at different levels of complexity and proficiency. These requirements support summative assessments at the end of the learning process but can also orient formative assessments taking place throughout the learning process.

**CURRICULA**
Curricula shape learning experiences and learning outcomes guide teaching by specifying expected knowledge and skills. Balancing detail in learning outcomes is crucial; it aids guidance but risks limiting local and individual adaptation.

**QUALIFICATIONS STANDARDS**
Learning outcomes shape qualification standards, specifying expected outcomes for full or partial qualifications. Often developed nationally, with input from stakeholders, these address a broad set of competences relevant to society and the labour market.

**OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS**
Occupational profiles, set by labour market stakeholders, strongly influence the definition of learning outcomes by signaling key employment skills.

**VALIDATION AND RECOGNITION**
Learning outcomes can be used as a reference point for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, as the focus is on the type of learning to have been achieved, not on a particular time required. This can play an important role in employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning.

Source: Authors, based on Cedefop (2022).
Alignment between applications

Development and application of learning outcomes for different purposes must be combined with alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2007)

Applications of learning outcomes in different contexts need to speak to and strengthen each other

Communication between the different instruments
The shift to learning outcomes; rhetoric or reality?

The study aims to map and analyse the transformation of intended learning outcomes into achieved learning outcomes.

- The research focuses on initial vocational education and training, in schools and apprenticeships,
- It seeks to map and better understand the features and factors influencing the transformation of intentions into teaching, learning and assessment.
Five key objectives structured in five work assignments

1. Influence of learning outcomes on pedagogical theory and tools
2. Influence of learning outcomes-based curricula on teaching practices
3. Influence of learning outcomes-based curricula in company training
4. Influence of learning outcomes on assessment
5. Suggestions/lessons for the way forward

Cedefop project: The shift to learning outcomes (2023-25)
An idealised model of the journey of learning outcomes in developing and renewing qualifications

Source: Cedefop (forthcoming)
## Potential factors of influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MICRO</th>
<th>MESO</th>
<th>MACRO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Awareness</td>
<td>- Guidance and support</td>
<td>- Definition of learning outcomes at national/regional level</td>
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<td>- Perceived usefulness</td>
<td>- Availability of resources</td>
<td>- System and/or institution alignment</td>
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<td>- Ownership</td>
<td>- Teacher collaboration</td>
<td>- Competing perspectives and interests</td>
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<td>- Professional identity</td>
<td>- Impact of the learning context</td>
<td>- Ideology and disciplinary dogma</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Learner preparedness and motivation</td>
<td>- Collaboration between VET providers and labour market stakeholders</td>
<td>- Pedagogical methodologies and techniques</td>
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<td>- ...</td>
<td>- Administrative workload</td>
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Signals of the use of learning outcomes approaches in VET

- Governance of VET and stakeholder involvement in developing qualifications and delivering VET
- Place of learning
- Role of a teacher and trainer (and other staff)
- Role of a learner
- Curriculum integration and content of VET
- Learning modality
- Structure of VET curriculum/ programme
- Role of assessment
- Inclusion
- Wellbeing of learners
- Matching demand and supply
- …
Research questions

Work assignments 1 to 5
Work assignment 1:
Influence of LO on pedagogical theory and tools

- How is the LO (competence) approach addressed in the theories underpinning teacher education?
- To what extent and how is the LO approach - influencing the teaching methodologies and tools - presented to future teachers?
- What is the impact to the actual implementation of teaching, learning and assessment in everyday practice?
- To what extent are LO, in the relevant theories and methodologies, seen as
  - accepted and/or part of dominant dogma
  - controversial and/or challenged
  - unknown and/or ignored

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Work assignment 2: Influence of learning outcomes-based curricula on teaching practices

- How – and to what extent - are teaching practices, in the cases covered by the study, being influenced by the learning outcomes approach?
- Is the application of learning outcomes a responsibility of the individual teacher or a responsibility of the institution?
- How are different teaching (and learning) environments, including online and hybrid, influencing the application of learning outcomes?
- What is the resource-implication of the shift to learning outcomes?
- How are different ways of formulating learning outcomes influencing the tensions influencing teaching practices?
- To what extent are students aware of the learning outcomes-based requirements?
Work assignment 3: The impact of learning outcomes-based curricula on work and practice-based IVET

- How are LO based curricula informing, influencing and/or steering work-based learning?
- To what extent and how are company trainers using the LO based curricula to plan and execute their job as trainers?
- To what extent are apprentices aware of the LO based requirements and how does this influence their progression?
Work assignment 4: Influence of learning outcomes on assessment

- What is the relationship between curriculum statements/intentions (intended learning outcomes), assessment processes and assessment?

- To what extent is the teaching and learning process informed by assessment criteria?

- What is the role of LO in formative and summative assessment?

- Which is the influence of online and hybrid teaching and learning processes on assessment practices?

- How are complex LO, notably transversal skills and competences, addressed and assessed?
Work assignment 5: The way forward

- Which **conceptual, structural and political factors** hinder and/or facilitate the transformation of learning outcomes into actual learning achievement?
- How do the above factors **influence learners, teachers, trainers, assessors** as well as **policy makers**?
- Which practical **recommendations** can improve the transformation of intended to achieved learning outcomes?
### Perspectives and practice of teacher training providers

Selected countries show **differences** in how learning outcomes approaches are integrated in the theoretical foundation of VET teacher training programmes.

Overall, when it comes to the practical embedding of learning outcomes in teacher training programmes, the **implicit** approach (BG, FI, FR, MT, PL, PT, SL) prevails over the **explicit** approach (IE, LT, NL).

In most countries, VET teachers and trainers are introduced to how LO are defined in occupational, educational standards, qualifications and/or national curricula as part of their **professional training**. In some countries, though, this is less explicit.

Critical comments refer to an unsatisfactory form of **implementation** of the approach, which requires further **consideration, awareness raising and training**.
Policy brief on learning outcomes
New policy brief on learning outcomes

- Learning outcomes are a **multifaceted phenomenon**, expanding across systems and borders.

- Countries **around the globe** use learning outcomes when defining, reviewing, and refining the content and profile of their education, training and skills provisions and strategies practices but **challenges** remain.

- Builds on **Cedefop’s**, **ETF’s** and **UNESCO’s** research on the topic.
Users and uses of learning outcomes

Source: Cedefop (2016).
Indicative examples selected from Europe and beyond

- A broad **political agreement** among stakeholders on the need for and usefulness of, learning outcomes.

- Learning outcomes ➤ **a common basis** for almost all national and regional qualifications frameworks worldwide.

- However, only in recent years can we see the **emergence of empirical evidence**.

- Learning outcomes-based qualifications frameworks ➤ **key instruments facilitating reform and governance**.

- Is there an **actual impact** on teaching, learning processes and **learner mobility** within European countries and beyond?

- Stakeholders ➤ should be involved in development and review so that learning outcomes are a ‘living thing’.

Source: Cedefop, 2024
Final considerations

- Learning outcomes → opportunity to have a **more learner-centred approach and systems.**

- The learning process can **rarely be fully predicted and described.** Learning outcomes must remain **open** to the **explorative** and to what has yet to be experienced and articulated.

- **Unreflected** use can lead to unintended simplifications → “dumping down” complex learning.

- “**Balancing act**” (broad/narrow; detailed/vague; prescriptive/openness) → awareness of inherent tensions.

- Important to reflect on enabling factors but also limitations → no single right or wrong → **need to share experiences (with practitioners).**
Thank you

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