



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND GOVERNANCE

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THE ASPIRATIONS



Tool for reform and governance

- Learning outcomes is seen as a way to shift from a provider to a learner centred approach, from a supply to a demand driven approach, from a rules-based to a result-oriented approach
- The shift to learning outcomes is seen as a way to combine top-down governance (through the setting of broad objectives and strategies) with strong local autonomy and responsibility (developing solutions adapted to local needs)

Explicit aspirations and ambitions

Learning outcomes based qualifications frameworks and qualifications standards are key-instruments facilitating reform and governance:

- Increasing transparency and comparability of qualifications
- Strengthening relevance and quality of qualifications
- Improving permeability of education and training systems
- Increasing flexibility of systems and learning pathways
- Allowing for learner centred teaching and learning
- Promoting active and creative learning



Implicit governance aspirations

Integrated in pedagogical developments and reforms we can observe an implicit emphasis on governance

- When developing learning outcomes based curricula and assessment specifications, there is a strong emphasis on 'alignment'.
- For learning outcomes to make a difference there is a need for different instruments to communicate - the signals sent by qualifications frameworks need to 'cascade down' to the classroom and the assessment situation (and vice versa)
- The efficiency of learning outcomes depends on this 'vertical integration', on the alignment between top and bottom

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES



Learning outcomes and governance - limitations to impact

- A question whether we overstate the potential impact of learning outcomes?
- A question whether top/down implementation of learning outcomes fail to influence teachers, trainers and learners
- A question whether lack of contextual specificity of learning outcomes reduces their relevance to users?
- An issue whether a strong focus on learning outcomes can divert attention from more pressing issues?
- Learning outcomes are sometimes implemented in 'silos' (frameworks, standards, curricula, assessment specifications...) not communicating with each other, lack of alignment'can reduce overall impact on reform and governance



Is the learning outcomes approach fit for the purpose of governing?

- Shifting to learning outcomes is by some seen as a 'MANAGERIAL TURN' and as imposing governance principle unsuitable to the complex reality of education and training
- The learning outcomes approach is seen as a direct continuation (under a new heading) of 'Educational technologies' developed in the US in the 1960s - aiming to create 'teacher proof' education and training systems
- A key feature of this 'educational technology' was to introduce objectives which could be unambiguously observed, measured and assessed

The wider context of learning outcomes: Management By Objectives (MBO)

- The shift to learning outcomes in education and training is closely related to the broader issue of management by objectives in the public sector
- MBO is established as a major approach to governance in the US and Europe from the 1960s and onwards (Drucker 1954 and 1976)

Norway exemplifies the ideology (Communication to Parliament 1987):

The purpose of MBO is to focus on the outcomes and results of policies, to allow central overview and a more comprehensive governance, to give freedom to the local and operational level to find solutions adopted to own needs, and to define clear requirements for outcomes, reflecting available resources



MBO in the hospital sector - some key lessons

- The setting of measurable and unambiguous objectives has proved complicated - different stakeholders have different views on which objectives to include and pursue
- Systematic measurement of results is complicated and resource-demanding
- A tension between quantitative and qualitative indicators
- The MBO tends to underestimate the complexity of the sector and is criticised for undermining flexibility and creativity...

Overall, the effectiveness of MBO as an instrument for governance is questioned: the reality of the hospital is too complex and the approach too simplistic.



A limited concept of rationality....

- Management by objectives as used by public sector institutions seems often to build on a simplistic notion of rationality.
- Applies a strategic-instrumental understanding of rationality where actors are judged according to their ability to choose optimal measures to reach a fixed goal. This implies that
 - Objectives are known
 - Implications of choices are known
 - That options are ranked
 - That the option giving best result is chosen
- This model of rationality, inspired by micro-economics and to some extent behaviourist management traditions, tends to underestimate the complexity of the policies and practises addressed

THE OPPORTUNITIES



FROM A RESULTS TOWARDS A PROCESS-ORIENTED LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACH

- While the original (MBO inspired) learning objectives movement focussed on teaching aims and objectives; a key **STRENGTH** of the learning outcomes approach - as it has developed since the 1980s - lies in its focus on the **INDIVIDUAL LEARNER**.
- The **OPPORTUNITY** lies in moving from a narrow, simplistic strategic-instrumental rationality to a broader process oriented understanding of learning outcomes
- We need to strengthen the focus on the **COMMUNICATIVE AND DELIBERATIVE** aspects of the learning outcomes approach - focussing on the social and normative processes involved
- For outcomes to be relevant the need to be defined, interpreted and revised through deliberation and negotiation; their **LEGITIMACY** matters.



Towards a process oriented understanding of learning outcomes.....some reflections

To support learning, and the coherence and depth of knowledge and skills, requires getting beneath the surface, to make contact with the underlying patterns and principles that give meaning to intelligent action..... Do not reduce knowledge to isolated objects in the mind....

Two starting points

DREYFUS and DREYFUS describe progression from novice to expert, demonstrating the increasing complexity of learning and how it is intrinsically linked to context and to social participation

BIGGS see understanding as an increase in the number and levels of connections learners make as they progress to higher levels of competence. Depth and quality of understanding matters more than quantity of information



Lessons for reform and governance

- The learning outcomes approach, through its focus on the learner, is essential for reforming and governing education and training in the time to come.
- A strategic-instrumental learning outcomes approach, however, neither support central overview/coherence nor local autonomy. A learning outcomes approach must be fit for purpose and address the complex reality it will operate in
- The social and situated character of learning is essential and requires an approach focussing on the communicative and deliberative character of learning
- The learning outcomes approach still needs developing, the development of an operational, process-oriented approach must be given priority