

**2<sup>nd</sup> POLICY LEARNING FORUM:****Defining and writing learning outcomes for VET qualifications***Cedefop, Thessaloniki 13-14 October 2016***(First working group session)****Working Group 2****Setting standards? Learning outcomes and their role in defining the content of VET qualifications****Work flow**

The working group discussed issues related to setting standards. George Kostakis moderated the session, introducing the thematic focus of the workshop and explaining the session flow. Stephanie Mayer, BMBF, Austria and Vladimir Borisov, NAVET, Bulgaria shared the national experience in defining and writing standards for qualifications and curricula, as a starting point of group discussions. The participants were presented with questions for further exploring the session topic. Participants split in four sub-groups based on their interest to discuss these questions. A representative of each sub-group shared the key messages discussed to all participants of WG2. Ernesto Villalba, Cedefop, was the rapporteur of the four working groups.

**The discussion focused on the following questions:**

1. How can (or should) learning outcomes statements describe:
  - a. the expected level of knowledge, skills and competences;
  - b. the breadth and scope of knowledge, skills and competences;
  - c. balancing precision/specificity with local adaptation and innovation
  - d. when defining the content of VET qualifications?
2. Which are the limitations of learning outcomes statements; what can or should not be described?

**The key messages can be summarized as follows:**

A first discussion in most of the groups involved the definition of standards and the type of standards that are being referred to in the question. All sub-groups acknowledged that standards differ depending on their purpose and context. Accordingly, the learning outcomes describing those standards are very different from context to context. Despite the differences in the objective of the standards, in terms of learning outcomes, it was possible to find some common ground for the discussion, once the initial understanding of standards was agreed.

In general, the sub-groups characterized the development of standards as the balancing act between extremes of a continuum. These extremes, represented normally in the form of dichotomies, were similar across the sub-groups. Groups differentiated several dimensions in the interpretation of standards:

- a) Standards for qualifications vs. standards for programs
- b) Standards referring to actions (teaching, training, assessment) vs. referring to documents (Qualifications, degrees)

- c) Intended vs. achieved standards
- d) Formal vs. informal oriented standards
- e) Broad vs. specific standards
- f) Central vs. locally defined standards

These different dimensions (or interpretations) of standards are to some extent underlying tension related to the dynamism of the elaboration of learning outcomes. This is to say, the need for both stability and change in the standards. On the one hand, standards need certain degree of stability. Stability is needed to build trust, to create a system that is recognizable and to allow continuity. On the other hand, there is a need for dynamism and possibility to change, as qualifications (and specially programs and curricula) are in constant change and need to adapt to new demands of society, local labor market or learners. More stable standards need to be broad, as there are, for example, in the case of NQFs. Standards associated with specific programs or curricula will tend to be more flexible and should permit faster change and they are more associated with assessment teaching or training standards. In general terms, they will be normally more locally defined than the broader standards.

Thus, it was common to all the sub-groups the need for adaptability of standards, or in other words, that standards follow the 'fit for purpose' principle. There is a need to strike a balance between dynamism and stability of learning outcomes. All groups agree that this search for balance can only be achieved involving all relevant stakeholders in the development of standards. It is important that they are involved in the creation and development of standards at the different levels. The word 'cooperation' among stakeholder was addressed in all sub-groups as a central element to develop standards based on learning outcomes.

In addition, it was addressed that in terms of learning outcomes for standards, there is a clear political commitment but this is not necessarily translated into the practice. There is a clear need for action in the connection between policy and practice, or the broad (more centrally defined, stable) standards with the more specific (more locally defined, dynamic) standards. It is necessary a better communication of the usefulness and benefits of having learning outcomes for standards in teaching and learning practices and not only at a political level. It is necessary to go beyond policies through for example creating networks of practitioners and schools that can exchange ideas about standards and assessments.

The group also discussed about how standards might aim at a different targets. Standards might be defined as ideal, average or minimum requirements. These will have important implications to understand the qualification or program they are referring to.

Finally it is also worth mentioning the diversity of approaches to standards that were highlighted in the discussions. The large differences in the numbers of registered qualifications countries have in their NQFs, from little more than 60 to more than 300, shows the complexity in having standards defined at European level. In this regard, the distinction between transparency versus harmonization is important. Learning outcomes and its use in standards is a tool for enhancing transparency. It is a way for people to better understand what a qualification, a program, a curriculum entails, not a way of making all the standards the same across countries, regions or qualifications. The necessity of accepting standards that address both flexibility and stability at the same time, was probably the most important message form group 2.

## More conclusions from the first and second sub-groups

(Rapporteurs of sub-groups: Agata Poczmańska, Poland; Brigitte Bouquet, France)

There are many purposes of using LOs. We can divide those purposes in two categories:

<b>Intended LOs</b>	<b>Achieved LOs</b>
<p>Are related to principles and concepts.</p> <p>They might be observed: NQF's descriptors, curricula, qualification descriptions, standards.</p> <p>They have formal meaning.</p> <p>People involved in development process of those LOs are defining <u>shape</u> of LOs. Those people are specialists in <u>writing</u> LOs <u>in general</u>. They are researchers, specialists from national/regional authorities for education etc.</p>	<p>Are related to theory and practice.</p> <p>They might be observed (or rather are the result of): training and assessment process.</p> <p>They have practical meaning.</p> <p>People involved in development process of those LOs are defining <u>content</u> of LOs. Those people are specialists in <u>defining and providing</u> LOs <u>for particular sector/occupation</u>. They are practitioners, education providers, social partners, sector's representatives etc.</p>
<p>Those two types of specialists should cooperate and influence on each other – at all stages of LOs' development and implementation process. It will ensure <u>balance</u> and comparability between intended and achieved LOs. It will also ensure flexibility and adaptability of LOs as well as fulfilment of different aims of using LOs.</p>	

There should be basic units of LOs. The possibility of adding other units will enable adaptability of LOs to local/regional needs of learners, providers and employers.

The LOs cannot be too detailed or too general (cooperation between different stakeholders mentioned above will enable the balance):

Too detailed LOs might affect validation process by making it too time-consuming and expensive. It will cause the fast outdated of the LOs (e.g. because of technological or legal changes) and therefore a frequent need to update them. Too detailed LOs will hinder adaptation of qualifications to the local/regional needs – LOs should give the common base but also possibility for adapting the LOs to the local/regional needs. The “niche approach” is needed – it should take into account the perspective of small, local/regional providers from very specific fields. Too detailed LOs will limit flexibility of using LOs. On the other hand, too general LOs may affect comparability between validation process (of the achieved LOs).

Right balance between intended and achieved LOs as well as between their generality/specificity is of high importance. To ensure it:

- The well-structured cooperation is needed between all stakeholders: social partners, national and local government, employers, sectoral organisations etc. All of them should take into account the international context and standards. Cooperation with foreign and international entities is valuable. It

will support stability and flexibility.

- Common agreement at European level on the key elements of qualifications' description (that there should be a title of qualification, list of LOs, list of assessment criteria etc.) is needed. However, it does not mean the need of common format as the approaches to describing qualifications are too different across Europe.

The learning outcomes must be sustainable, despite the rapid evolution of the skills, especially the technical ones.

Further work should be done in order to find the right granularity of the outcomes. Learning outcomes should be described in such a way that they can remain stable, as their assessment can change, especially in the technical fields.

When the learning outcomes are assessed, there was an agreement that the assessment is about the minimum required level.