



## BACKGROUND NOTE

### POLICY LEARNING FORUM ON DEFINING AND WRITING OF LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR VET QUALIFICATIONS

**Thessaloniki 24-25 September 2015**

A main priority for Cedefop is to support Member States and Social Partners in further developing and improving vocational education and training and lifelong learning policies and practises. To be able to do this in a systematic way, Cedefop will from 2015 organise a series of *Policy Learning Fora* on a range of different subjects. The first forum, on the 24-25 of September 2015, will address the 'definition and writing of learning outcomes for VET qualifications'.

#### **1. CEDEFOP'S POLICY LEARNING FORA**

Cedefop's external evaluation (2013) points out that the Agency needs to increase its policy support to member states and social partners. While Cedefop has successfully supported European-level developments (for example European principles and tools), it has only to a limited degree - due to available human and financial resources - been able to enter in a direct dialogue with national and sectoral stakeholders.

The 2015 launching of *Policy Learning Fora* addresses this challenge. Cedefop's comparative evidence and in-depth expertise will be used to support a systematic exchange of experiences between national and sectoral stakeholders. Our longer term aim is to open up for a continuous process of sharing and learning where initial policy learning events are followed up by additional events and/or continued cooperation.

Each policy learning event will, for practical reasons, be open to a limited number of countries having expressed particular interest in the chosen topic. To provide the best possible basis for the discussions, prior to the event, Cedefop will distribute extensive background material, reflecting our comparative research in the area.

#### **2. THE DEFINITION, WRITING, REVIEW AND APPLICATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Cedefop's policy learning forum on defining and writing learning outcomes will pilot the new policy-learning format and systematically explore the way the learning outcomes 'methodology' is understood and applied throughout Europe, focusing on similarities as well as differences. Recent research carried out by Cedefop (Cedefop 2014) demonstrates that while the learning outcomes methodology is rapidly gaining ground across Europe, the diversity of interpretations and applications calls for more dialogue and sharing of experiences. The PLF responds to this need for mutual learning and will focus on the following questions:

- **How** are learning outcomes expectations defined and articulated?
- **What** is the content and profile of intended learning outcomes?
- **Who** are involved in the definition and articulation of learning outcomes?
- **Why** has a particular approach been chosen and to what extent is this embedded in particular education/VET and/or employment policies?

The forum takes as its starting point that there is no single way of applying learning outcomes but that the comparison of concrete national experiences may help us to identify challenges and improve the way the learning outcomes approach is applied. The experiences from the PLF will feed directly into the work of Cedefop on a European 'Handbook on learning outcomes' to be developed in close collaboration with countries and stakeholders, including the EQF Advisory Group. It forms a part of its work programme on learning outcomes for 2015-2016.

### **3. THE SCOPE OF THE POLICY LEARNING FORUM**

The policy learning forum will focus on qualifications from initial VET (EQF levels 34). Taking national standards and/or curricula as a starting point, the forum will explore how these have been defined and described using a learning outcomes/competence based approach. The forum will gather national and sectoral experts directly involved in the writing of learning outcomes at national level. This will allow for a concrete process of sharing and learning. Three concrete VET qualifications cases from the crafts, industry and service sectors will be used:

- Plumbing (Heating and cooling)
- Machine operator (CNC)
- Tourism/travel sales and services

European countries representing different approaches to vocational education and training will provide an initial input to the forum, offering detailed insight into the way they have approached the three concrete qualifications listed above. Based on these initial discussions, as well as taking into account the evidence provided by Cedefop, participants will work together in small working groups seeking to identify main lessons - both in terms of strengths and weaknesses - in the way the learning outcomes approach has been understood and applied. The input to the policy learning forum will be made by national experts and administrators, either in public administration, qualification agencies or from relevant stakeholders, including social partners, directly involved in the definition, writing and review of learning outcomes for VET. This 'hands-on approach' allows for an informed exchange of experiences potentially adding substantial value to existing national practises.

#### **4. ISSUES AND QUESTIONS INFORMING THE WORK OF THE PLF**

Cedefop will, based on previous and ongoing research, provide extensive empirical and analytical evidence to support and stimulate the exchanges between the participating countries and stakeholders. The following issues will be addressed and will orient the Policy Learning Forum:

##### **4.1. How learning outcomes are conceptualised**

- What is the theoretical point of departure for the definition and writing of learning outcomes; which are the practical/political implications?
- Learning outcomes and/or competences: How are these terms understood; as synonyms or as separate concepts; which are the implications for policies and practises?
- The learning outcomes terminology: To what extent is the terminology based on a predefined taxonomy; to what extent is terminological guidance provided; which are the main terminological tricks and traps?
- The learning outcomes structure: To what extent is it a pre-defined structure (for example clarifying and explaining the relationship between subject, action verb, object and context)?
- The distinction between learning objectives and learning outcomes: How is this distinction understood and which are the implications?

##### **4.2 Using learning outcomes to express the content and profile of a qualification**

- The learning outcomes and the purposes of VET: how narrow or broad are the purposes of VET defined through the application of the learning outcomes?
- Learning outcomes and the domains of learning: How are different domains of learning (knowledge, skills, competence, attitudes etc.) articulated and addressed;
- Learning outcomes and the expression of complexity: How are different levels of learning outcomes described and how is this related to progression in learning?
- How does learning outcomes balance between occupational specific and transversal knowledge, skills and competences?

##### **4.3 What informs the writing of learning outcomes?**

- The empirical reference point for the writing of learning outcomes: To what extent are the following aspects taken into account:
  - Functional analysis of tasks?
  - Broader occupational analysis and research on the labour market?
  - Theoretically defined subjects and disciplines?

- The mechanisms for informing the writing of learning outcomes; the availability and use of labour market intelligence and stakeholder dialogue.

#### **4.4 How are learning outcomes reviewed and renewed - change and impact**

- Changing learning outcomes requirements: To what extent are learning outcomes written to facilitate and open up to change and renewal?
- Who takes part in the review and renewal of learning outcomes?
- Implementing learning outcomes: How are learning outcomes to facilitate assessment as well as teaching and learning?
- Supporting local adaptation; How prescriptive are learning outcomes; to what extent do they open to local adaptation?