

**2nd POLICY LEARNING FORUM:****Defining and writing learning outcomes for VET qualifications***Cedefop, Thessaloniki 13-14 October 2016***Comments and observations from international expert****(Stavroula Bibila)**

This second policy learning forum was equally interesting and demanding given that it acted as a platform to discuss the opportunities and tensions that arise from the implementation of the learning outcomes approach in various national and local contexts.

A number of participants and Cedefop experts commented on the distinction between theory and practice. The saying that “in theory there is no difference between theory and practice, in practice there is” was exemplified in many of the discussions, discussions that took place during the Plenary, the Working Groups and during informal gatherings over coffee and dinner. For this reason, the attempt to put together a Handbook for the Writing of Learning Outcomes is both ambitious and admirable, providing that it is written with the intention to be used in practice rather than to be stacked on some library shelf.

A second pertinent distinction was made by the representative from the Commission during the opening of the policy forum and that was the distinction between the policy and the practice of the learning outcomes approach. I have been fortunate to be a VET learner, teacher, teacher trainer and researcher and consequently I have engaged with many dimensions of the world of VET practice. Drawing from personal experience, I can say that the practical side of implementing the learning outcomes approach has its own political aspect. We read in chapter 8 of the Cedefop (2016) study about the varied acceptability of the learning outcomes approach by the academic community in the education of teachers, an area of Higher VET itself characterised by tensions stemming from its location on the boundaries of VET and Higher Education. Over the two days of the policy forum we discussed the tensions between prescriptive and open ended approaches to writing learning outcomes, the contradictions between behaviourists and constructivist approaches and the requirements of employers and the industry for detailed and more specific learning outcomes, a significant challenge when it comes to revising curricula and learning programmes.

Ultimately, and from a pragmatic point of view, all discussions and actions turn into one question: “So what?” Now, if the answer to the “so what?” question does not address shifts in actual teaching and learning practices and improvements in learning that takes place in classrooms and work places, then all discussions or actions, they might as well not have taken place. The answer to the “so what?” question will be partly given by learners, practitioners and employers as well as the research community. This points to the important role of Cedefop in collecting and sharing examples of not just ‘good practice’ but of evidence-based good practice.

The proposed community of VET practice in learning outcomes therefore needs to equally embrace a diverse member base so that the tensions that we discussed and experienced during the policy forum become more visible. Ultimately, negotiating these tensions, and starting by accepting them, is part of the political aspect of the practical side of implementing the learning outcomes approach across Europe and in a variety of contexts, including Higher VET.

I closed my contribution to the forum by another pragmatic question, the question of “What next?” At this stage, and from a personal point of view, it seems that the need to establish and nurture a VET community of practice on implementing the learning outcomes approach seems greater than ever.

