



CEDEFOP INSIGHTS

Policy pointers for the shift to learning outcomes

Lessons from European VET systems



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CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

Learning outcomes are statements describing what learners are expected to know, understand and be able to do upon completion of a learning process. Over the past two decades, the learning outcomes-based approach has become a central feature of education and training reforms across Europe and internationally, influencing the design of qualifications, curricula, assessment systems and qualifications frameworks.

Beyond their pedagogical function, learning outcomes have increasingly become important instruments of education, labour market and qualifications policy. Their expanding role has, however, generated considerable debate. Several scholars have criticised learning outcomes for potentially narrowing learning, fragmenting knowledge and reducing the complexity of educational processes, rather than promoting the active and self-directed learning that the approach is intended to support (Allais, 2014; Hussey & Smith, 2002, 2008; Veitch, 2025; Wheelahan, 2010).

At the same time, a substantial body of literature highlights the multiple purposes that learning outcomes can serve (Adam, 2004; Cedefop, 2024; Harris & Clayton, 2019; Kennedy, 2006; Zhang & Peterbauer, 2020). Learning outcomes can be used to enhance the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications by clearly expressing what learners are expected to know, understand and be able to do, thereby supporting recognition, mobility and communication among learners, education providers, employers and policymakers. They strengthen the connection between education and the labour market by describing learning achievements in terms that are meaningful to employers, supporting dialogue with labour market stakeholders and improving the relevance of education and training.

By promoting a learner-centred approach, learning outcomes focus on learner achievement rather than teaching inputs, enabling more flexible, inclusive and personalised teaching, learning and assessment. They also support lifelong and life-wide learning by facilitating the recognition and validation of learning acquired in formal, non-formal and informal settings, while enabling flexible learning pathways, credit transfer, progression and mobility. In addition, learning outcomes provide a coherent basis for curriculum design, assessment and quality assurance, helping align learning, teaching and assessment with clearly defined expectations and supporting consistent educational provision.

Finally, they contribute to governance and qualifications system reform by underpinning qualifications frameworks, validation and recognition arrangements, strengthening coordination among stakeholders, and supporting accountability and system-wide improvement.

Building on these considerations, the aim of this Cedefop Insight is to identify policy pointers that can support the transformation of intended learning outcomes into achieved learning outcomes, considering their limitations. Drawing on evidence from 10 European countries, the Insight highlights factors that facilitate the implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches and offers insights for policymakers, institutional leaders and practitioners seeking to strengthen the translation of policy intentions into educational practice.

The policy pointers are grounded in findings from the Cedefop project [The shift to learning outcomes: rhetoric or reality?](#), which examined the implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches in initial vocational education and training (IVET) across Bulgaria, Ireland, France, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Finland. The project investigated the factors influencing the transformation of intended learning outcomes, as expressed in curricula and other reference documents, into achieved learning outcomes demonstrated by learners. The analysis was organised around four dimensions of implementation: teacher training and pedagogy, curriculum development, work-based learning, and assessment, and considered how learning outcomes are understood and applied at policy, institutional and individual levels (see Cedefop 2024b, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). The policy pointers presented in this paper were developed through a synthesis of the evidence generated across these dimensions and levels of analysis.

CHAPTER 2.

Context

2.1. The conceptual foundations of learning outcomes

For much of the twentieth century, education systems were predominantly organised around an input-based model of learning, where educational provision was defined in terms of curriculum content, instructional time and teaching processes. Within this paradigm, teachers acted as the primary source of knowledge, while learners were largely positioned as recipients of information. Although such approaches provided consistency and predictability, they tended to place greater emphasis on knowledge transmission than on the demonstration and application of learning (Ellis, 1999).

The emergence of learning outcomes represents a significant shift in how learning is conceptualised, designed and evaluated. Rather than focusing on educational inputs, learning outcomes emphasise what learners are expected to know, understand and be able to do following a learning experience. In this perspective, the focus moves from teaching to learning, placing greater attention on learner achievement and progression. Consequently, the role of educators is increasingly understood as facilitating learning, while learners are expected to take a more active role in the learning process (Noushad, 2024).

Despite their widespread adoption, learning outcomes remain conceptually contested. Critics argue that the emphasis on clearly specified and measurable outcomes may encourage a reductionist understanding of learning and fragment knowledge into discrete units that fail to capture the complexity of learning processes (Allais, 2014). Others contend that this criticism overstates the relationship between learning outcomes and behaviourism. Contemporary learning outcomes can encompass higher-order capabilities such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and professional judgement, providing a flexible framework for learning and assessment rather than prescribing narrow behavioural responses (Dobbins, 2014).

A related debate concerns the extent to which learning outcomes can influence educational practice. Instrumental perspectives tend to assume that clearly defined learning outcomes can be implemented in a relatively linear manner. Institutional perspectives, however, emphasise that learning outcomes are interpreted and enacted by policymakers, institutional leaders, teachers, trainers and learners, each of whom may attribute different meanings and purposes to them (Michelsen et al., 2016). Consequently, their impact depends not

only on how they are formulated but also on how they are understood and translated into everyday educational practice.

Although learning outcomes have their origins in pedagogical and psychological theories of learning, their widespread adoption has been driven by broader economic, social and policy developments. This has been particularly evident in vocational education and training (VET), where learning outcomes have increasingly been used to strengthen the relationship between education, qualifications and labour market needs.

2.2. Learning outcomes and the transformation of VET

The growing use of learning outcomes in VET has been closely linked to economic and technological transformations since the 1980s. As labour markets became more knowledge-intensive and occupational profiles more complex, workers were increasingly expected to demonstrate broader competences, adaptability and lifelong learning capacities. These developments challenged traditional vocational education models and created demand for qualifications systems capable of describing and recognising a wider range of competences (Brockmann et al., 2008; Kinta, 2013). Within this context, learning outcomes offered a mechanism for expressing qualifications in terms of what individuals are able to demonstrate rather than the content they have studied or the duration of their training. This shift was particularly relevant for VET, where the ultimate objective is the development of occupational competence and employability (Cedefop, 2024a).

The concept of competence occupies a central position in this transformation. Unlike traditional approaches that often emphasised disciplinary knowledge, competence-based approaches seek to capture the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for successful performance in occupational contexts. The significance of this broader perspective is particularly evident in VET, where vocational competence frequently requires the simultaneous integration of theoretical understanding, practical skills and professional attitudes. Consequently, one of the persistent challenges in implementing learning outcomes-based approaches in VET has been ensuring that qualifications adequately reflect the full complexity of occupational competence rather than privileging only those aspects that are easiest to articulate and assess (Kinta, 2013).

Alongside labour market developments, the adoption of learning outcomes has been strongly influenced by policy reforms at both national and European levels. Cedefop (2010) identifies four broad drivers underpinning the shift towards learning outcomes in VET systems: evolving pedagogical approaches, stronger

alignment between education and labour market requirements, improved governance and efficiency of qualifications systems, and the growing need for mobility and comparability across national borders.

At the European level, the learning outcomes approach gained momentum through initiatives aimed at enhancing transparency, recognition and mobility. Although the Bologna Declaration (European Ministers of Education, 1999) did not explicitly refer to learning outcomes, subsequent ministerial communiqués increasingly promoted their use as a means of improving the comparability and readability of qualifications ‘Bologna process’ (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2003; 2005). During the same period, learning outcomes became a foundational principle underpinning several European transparency instruments. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), for example, defines qualification levels through learning outcomes rather than educational inputs, enabling comparisons across national systems and educational sectors. Similar principles have informed the development of ESCO and initiatives supporting the recognition and validation of learning acquired in formal, non-formal and informal settings.

These developments have positioned learning outcomes as a central feature of contemporary VET policy. Learning outcomes are increasingly viewed as a common language through which education providers, employers, policymakers and learners can communicate expectations, achievements and progression opportunities.

Despite broad policy consensus regarding the value of learning outcomes, their implementation has proven neither straightforward nor uniform. While learning outcomes are widely embedded in qualifications frameworks, curricula and policy documents, evidence suggests that their influence on teaching, learning, assessment and workplace practices varies considerably across contexts. The challenge therefore lies not only in defining learning outcomes but also in ensuring that they are consistently understood, interpreted and applied by the actors responsible for their implementation. This raises important questions about the conditions that enable the transformation of intended learning outcomes into achieved learning outcomes. The following chapter addresses these questions by presenting policy pointers derived from evidence across European IVET systems.

CHAPTER 3.

Policy pointers for learning outcomes implementation

Grounded in evidence from the 10 European countries analysed, the following policy pointers aim to support policymakers, institutional leaders, and practitioners in advancing learning outcomes-based approaches from policy to practice. These policy pointers are designed not to 'solve' the tensions identified in the previous chapters (many of which are inherent to the approach), but to create conditions in which these tensions become productive rather than a barrier to the approach's use. Specifically, the policy pointers aim to build professional capacity to interpret learning outcomes meaningfully, support empowerment rather than compliance, strengthen participatory processes, and develop a system that enables flexibility.

3.1. Policy pointer 1. Balancing system coherence and implementation flexibility

Evidence from the countries analysed suggests that coherent policy frameworks are a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for transforming intended learning outcomes into achieved learning outcomes. Where learning outcomes are supported by stable qualifications frameworks, aligned curricula, assessment arrangements and quality assurance mechanisms, implementation is more likely to extend beyond formal policy documents and become embedded in educational practice. On the contrary, fragmented or inconsistent policy environments often result in uneven implementation, uncertainty among practitioners and the perception that learning outcomes represent an additional administrative requirement rather than a tool for improving teaching and learning.

The findings also indicate that countries face different challenges depending on the maturity of their learning outcomes systems (Pouliou & Symeonidis, 2026 forthcoming). In countries where learning outcomes have already been embedded across qualifications, curricula and assessment arrangements, the priority is less about introducing new reforms and more about maintaining coherence through regular review, stakeholder engagement and adaptation to emerging developments, such as digitalisation, sustainability and demographic change. In countries where implementation remains incomplete, greater attention may be

needed to strengthen legal frameworks, aligning policy instruments and clarifying expectations regarding the use of learning outcomes across the VET system.

At the same time, successful implementation depends not only on policy design but also on how learning outcomes are interpreted and enacted by practitioners. Excessively prescriptive approaches may undermine implementation by limiting professional judgement and reducing stakeholder ownership. Systems where learning outcomes are more effectively embedded in educational practice tend to combine clear system-level expectations with sufficient flexibility for teachers, trainers and institutions to contextualise learning outcomes according to sectoral, institutional and learner needs. Learning outcomes are most effective when they are perceived as tools for enhancing teaching, learning and assessment rather than as compliance mechanisms.

Achieving this balance requires more than the formal inclusion of learning outcomes in legislation or qualifications frameworks. Qualifications should be defined in terms of learning outcomes and supported by alignment between curricula, teaching, assessment and work-based learning. At the same time, practitioners should retain the autonomy to select teaching methods, learning activities and assessment approaches appropriate to their context, recognising that multiple pathways may lead to the achievement of the same intended learning outcomes. Professional judgement in interpreting and contextualising learning outcomes should be expected, valued and supported.

The evidence highlights the importance of policy coherence for the effective implementation of learning outcomes. They should be consistently embedded across qualifications frameworks, curricula, assessment, quality assurance and professional standards, as conflicting policy expectations can weaken implementation. Coherence should be supported by regular stakeholder review and combined with sufficient flexibility within a long-term vision for education and skills development. As implementation develops gradually, sustained political commitment, investment in professional capacity and clear communication are essential. Ultimately, progress should be measured not by the speed of adoption but by the extent to which learning outcomes are meaningfully integrated into curriculum, teaching, assessment and work-based learning.

3.2. Policy pointer 2. Building shared understanding through professional dialogue

Learning outcomes-based approaches depend not only on the quality of learning outcomes statements but also on the extent to which stakeholders develop a shared understanding of their meaning and application. Learning outcomes require

interpretation, particularly when they address complex competences, transversal skills or workplace performance. Transparency is therefore not an inherent feature of learning outcomes but something that is gradually constructed through professional dialogue and collective practice.

The findings indicate that practitioners often derive greater support from peer exchange than from top-down communication alone. While policy frameworks, guidelines and official documentation are important for establishing common expectations, they cannot fully address the contextual challenges encountered in teaching, assessment and work-based learning. Teachers, trainers and institutional leaders frequently report that opportunities to discuss the interpretation of learning outcomes, compare approaches and jointly address implementation challenges are among the most valuable forms of support. Such exchanges help reduce uncertainty and contribute to greater consistency in the way learning outcomes are understood and applied.

The evidence also suggests that practitioners value concrete examples of implementation but often struggle to assess their relevance when presented without sufficient contextual information. Effective implementation therefore requires opportunities not only to share practices but also to discuss the conditions under which those practices were developed and applied. Collaborative dialogue enables practitioners to examine how learning outcomes can be interpreted within specific occupational, institutional and learner contexts while maintaining alignment with broader system expectations.

A key implication is the need to establish structured opportunities for professional dialogue within and across institutions. Peer-to-peer collaboration can support the collective analysis of learning outcomes, the development of shared interpretations, and the exchange of approaches to teaching and assessment. Collaborative work on assessment tasks, rubrics and learning activities may be particularly valuable for complex or transversal competences where interpretation is often less straightforward. Such processes can contribute to the development of collective knowledge and help make interpretation visible rather than implicit.

The findings highlight the importance of dialogue and collaboration between VET providers and workplaces to ensure coherent interpretation and application of learning outcomes across school-based and work-based learning. In many contexts, differences in interpretation can hinder coherence and progression, so stronger cooperation between institutions, employers and in-company trainers is needed to align workplace learning with intended outcomes and ensure that workplace evidence is properly recognised. Intermediary organisations, sectoral bodies and professional committees can support this process by translating learning outcomes into forms usable in workplace settings. Overall, effective

implementation depends less on one-way communication and more on sustained collaboration, professional learning and joint reflection, which build shared understanding while maintaining the flexibility needed across occupational and institutional contexts.

3.3. Policy pointer 3. Providing accessible and adaptable implementation support

Approaches presented as universally applicable ‘good practices’ often fail to acknowledge the diversity of VET systems, institutional settings and occupational contexts within which learning outcomes are implemented. Effective implementation support therefore requires guidance that is accessible, adaptable and responsive to the needs of different stakeholders.

While many countries and institutions have developed valuable resources to support the use of learning outcomes, these materials are often dispersed across organisations, projects and policy initiatives. Practitioners may therefore struggle to identify relevant resources, understand how they relate to their own contexts, or keep pace with evolving practices and requirements. Building on existing materials rather than creating new resources from scratch can help avoid duplication of effort while ensuring that support remains grounded in established practice. Experiences from several countries also demonstrate the value of drawing on European tools, frameworks and expertise to strengthen national and institutional approaches to learning outcomes implementation.

To address these challenges, consideration should be given to developing accessible implementation support tools, such as online toolkits, that bring together practical resources, implementation guidance and opportunities for professional exchange. Rather than functioning as repositories of model solutions, such tools should support practitioners in interpreting, adapting and applying learning outcomes within their own contexts. The objective should be to facilitate implementation and professional learning rather than prescribe specific approaches.

A key function of such tools would be to support contextualised practice sharing. Resources should therefore be accompanied by information describing the circumstances in which they were developed and applied, including the characteristics of the VET system, institution or occupational field, the challenges being addressed and the lessons learnt during implementation. This would allow users to assess the relevance of practices to their own settings and make informed decisions regarding adaptation. Resources should be searchable according to

stakeholder roles, implementation challenges and system characteristics to facilitate access to relevant information.

Implementation support should also promote professional dialogue and peer learning. Rather than simply disseminating examples, support tools should enable practitioners to discuss how learning outcomes are interpreted and applied, exchange experiences and document adaptations made in different contexts. Such interaction would reinforce the principle that learning outcomes require interpretation and that implementation is strengthened through collective reflection and professional exchange.

Particular attention should be given to areas that practitioners frequently identify as challenging. These include the assessment of complex competences, especially those involving critical thinking, creativity, ethical reasoning and other transversal dimensions; the integration of learning outcomes into work-based learning environments; and the strengthening of learner engagement and ownership of the learning process. Practical examples, implementation guides and assessment resources addressing these areas can help bridge the gap between policy intentions and everyday practice.

Accessible implementation support should be seen as a continuous process rather than a one-off activity, requiring regularly-updated resources, effective communication and dissemination to keep practitioners informed of developments and available support. Future initiatives could include self-reflection tools to help stakeholders assess implementation maturity, identify areas for improvement and support evidence-informed dialogue. Crucially, implementation support should emphasise adaptation rather than replication, avoiding 'best practice' models and instead explaining how and why different approaches were used, under what conditions, and with what lessons learned. This approach strengthens professional judgement and supports more context-sensitive implementation of learning outcomes.

3.4. Policy pointer 4. Building interpretive capacity among VET practitioners

The transformation of intended learning outcomes into achieved learning outcomes depends fundamentally on the capacity of practitioners to interpret learning outcomes and translate them into teaching practices, work-based learning activities and assessment approaches. Learning outcomes do not provide ready-made solutions for practice. Rather, they require professional judgement regarding how outcomes should be understood, contextualised and enacted in different

learning environments. Building this interpretive capacity is therefore a central condition for effective implementation.

The findings suggest that access to professional development remains uneven across stakeholder groups. While many VET teachers encounter learning outcomes during their initial education or subsequent professional development activities, in-company trainers often receive little or no formal preparation for their educational role. Their understanding of learning outcomes frequently relies on informal communication with schools, workplace experience or individual initiative. At the same time, access to professional development among teachers is not uniform, and many continue to report limited opportunities to strengthen their understanding and application of learning outcomes. Capacity-building efforts should therefore address the needs of both school-based and workplace-based practitioners.

Professional development should move beyond compliance-oriented approaches that focus primarily on explaining policy requirements or prescribed procedures. The findings indicate that practitioners are more likely to engage with learning outcomes when they are presented as tools for enhancing teaching, learning and assessment rather than as mechanisms of accountability. The objective should therefore be to develop practitioners' capacity to make informed professional judgements, reflect critically on their practice and adapt learning outcomes to different contexts. In this sense, professional development should strengthen interpretive capacity rather than behavioural compliance.

Building such capacity requires differentiated approaches that recognise the distinct roles and responsibilities of practitioners. For teachers, learning outcomes should be integrated throughout initial teacher education and continuing professional development, supporting curriculum design, lesson planning, assessment and learner support within outcomes-based frameworks. Particular attention should be given to areas that practitioners frequently identify as challenging, including the assessment of complex and transversal competences, the alignment of learning activities and assessment with intended outcomes, and the avoidance of overly narrow or assessment-driven interpretations of learning outcomes. Professional development should also encourage critical engagement with both the opportunities and limitations of learning outcomes-based approaches.

For in-company trainers, capacity-building initiatives should acknowledge the realities of workplace learning environments and the limited time often available for formal training. Support should therefore focus on practical aspects of implementation, such as understanding learning outcomes, linking them to workplace tasks, providing constructive feedback and contributing to assessment

processes. Flexible delivery models, combining online learning opportunities with workplace-based support, mentoring and practical guidance materials, may help reduce participation barriers and facilitate engagement.

Capacity-building should be treated as a continuous process rather than a one-off activity, with practitioners needing ongoing opportunities to update knowledge, share experiences and reflect on evolving curricula, qualifications and labour market demands. It should be embedded within wider implementation strategies and linked to collaborative structures, professional dialogue and implementation support mechanisms. Ultimately, learning outcomes only become meaningful when they are understood by teachers, trainers and assessors, making sustained investment in professional capacity across both school-based and workplace-based settings which is essential for translating policy intentions into everyday practice.

3.5. **Policy pointer 5. Using quality assurance as a driver of continuous improvement**

The findings point to a persistent gap between intended and achieved learning outcomes. While most VET systems have established quality assurance mechanisms, these often focus primarily on compliance with procedures and whether learning outcomes are formally embedded in curricula and assessment arrangements. Greater emphasis is needed in supporting the continuous improvement of teaching, learning and assessment practices thereby strengthening the alignment between intended and achieved learning outcomes.

To support the implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches, quality assurance should be understood as a developmental, context sensitive process rather than solely an accountability mechanism. It should systematically draw on evidence from multiple sources to understand how learning outcomes are being implemented in practice (Cedefop, 2015). This is most effective when institutional self-assessment is combined with external evaluation as part of a continuous improvement cycle. Internal quality assurance should enable practitioners to review assessment practices, analyse learner achievement and identify priorities for improvement, while external quality assurance should validate institutional self-assessment, provide an independent perspective and support improvement rather than focusing primarily on compliance. These processes should be complemented by systematically collected feedback from learners, employers, teachers, trainers and institutional leaders on the relevance, achievability and assessment of learning outcomes. Together, these sources of information enable institutions to identify implementation challenges, prioritise

improvement actions, monitor their impact over time and ensure that programmes remain responsive to changing learner and labour market needs.

At the same time, quality assurance should avoid encouraging overly prescriptive approaches to implementation. Review processes should examine whether learning outcomes are coherently reflected in curriculum design, teaching, assessment and learner achievement, while allowing institutions sufficient flexibility to adapt implementation to learners' needs and local educational and occupational contexts. Evaluation should focus on the quality and coherence of implementation rather than conformity to pedagogical approaches or formulations of learning outcomes, recognising that there is no single ideal way of defining or applying learning outcomes across different contexts. To support both consistency and flexibility, national authorities should provide clear guidance and reference points for the interpretation and use of learning outcomes, while preserving sufficient flexibility for institutions and practitioners to adapt implementation to local contexts.

3.6. Policy pointer 6. Strengthen stakeholder participation in learning outcomes governance

Learning outcomes can only fulfil their intended purpose when they remain relevant to evolving occupational, educational and societal needs. The findings suggest that the value of learning outcomes-based approaches is reduced when qualifications and curricula are rarely updated or when governance processes fail to capture changes occurring in workplaces, occupations and learning environments. In such situations, practitioners often compensate informally for gaps between centrally defined learning outcomes and the competences required in practice, reducing the transparency and consistency that learning outcomes are intended to support.

Maintaining the relevance of learning outcomes requires governance arrangements that enable continuous dialogue and regular feedback rather than relying solely on periodic reviews or one-off consultations. While labour market representatives are often involved in the initial development of qualifications and learning outcomes, mechanisms for ongoing review and adaptation are frequently less developed. More responsive governance arrangements are characterised by continuous engagement and maintaining interest with labour market representatives and by the capacity to translate emerging needs into revisions of qualifications, curricula and assessment requirements.

The findings further suggest that stakeholder participation is important not only for maintaining relevance but also for strengthening ownership. Practitioners who are responsible for implementing learning outcomes are often

underrepresented in governance processes despite their unique insights into how learning outcomes function in practice. Teachers, trainers and institutional leaders can provide valuable feedback regarding the clarity, feasibility and assessability of learning outcomes, helping to identify challenges that may not be visible at policy level. Creating formal channels through which such perspectives can inform decision-making can contribute to more realistic and implementable learning outcomes.

Balanced representation within governance structures is equally important. Effective governance requires the involvement of employers, trade unions, education and training providers, pedagogical experts and other relevant stakeholders. Such participation can help balance labour market responsiveness with educational considerations and strengthen shared ownership of qualifications and learning outcomes. Learning outcomes should not only reflect occupational requirements but also support broader educational objectives, including learner progression, personal development and lifelong learning.

Learners themselves also have an important role to play. Despite being the primary beneficiaries of learning outcomes-based approaches, their perspectives are often absent from governance arrangements. Greater involvement of learners can help ensure that learning outcomes remain meaningful, understandable and relevant to their experiences. Participation may take different forms depending on national and institutional contexts, including representation in curriculum committees, consultation processes or programme development activities.

The findings therefore show that rather than viewing the development of learning outcomes as a one-off technical exercise, governance should be understood as an ongoing process of dialogue, review and adaptation.

CHAPTER 4.

Concluding remarks

4.1. Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this study suggest that the implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches should be understood as a systemic transformation rather than a technical curriculum reform. The transformation from intended to achieved learning outcomes depends on the interaction between policy frameworks, institutional arrangements, professional practices and stakeholder engagement.

Consequently, the policy pointers presented in this Insight should be viewed as interconnected and mutually reinforcing rather than as standalone actions. Strengthening implementation requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the VET system, combining coherent policy frameworks, professional dialogue, implementation support, capacity building, quality assurance and participatory governance. The following implications emerge from the analysis:

4.1.1. Policy implications

- (a) **Prioritise implementation alongside design.** The effectiveness of learning outcomes depends not only on how they are formulated but also on how they are interpreted, enacted and supported in practice.
- (b) **Balance coherence with flexibility.** Policy frameworks should provide clear expectations and common reference points while allowing practitioners sufficient autonomy to adapt learning outcomes to different institutional, occupational and learner contexts.
- (c) **Embed learning outcomes within broader system arrangements.** Qualifications frameworks, curricula, assessment regulations, quality assurance mechanisms and governance structures should communicate consistent messages regarding the purpose and use of learning outcomes.
- (d) **Promote review and stakeholder participation.** Learning outcomes should be reviewed and updated through governance arrangements that actively involve employers, trade unions, VET providers, practitioners and learners.
- (e) **View quality assurance as a tool for improvement.** Quality assurance should support reflection, feedback and continuous improvement rather than focusing solely on compliance and accountability.

4.1.2. Practice implications

- (a) **Strengthen practitioners' interpretive capacity.** Teachers, trainers and institutional leaders require ongoing support to translate intended learning outcomes into teaching, assessment and work-based learning practices.
- (b) **Recognise professional dialogue as a key implementation mechanism.** Shared understanding of learning outcomes develops through collaboration, peer learning and collective reflection rather than through guidance documents alone.
- (c) **Improve support for in-company trainers.** Capacity-building efforts should give particular attention to workplace trainers, who often have limited access to pedagogical preparation despite their central role in work-based learning.
- (d) **Provide accessible and adaptable implementation support.** Practitioners benefit from contextualised guidance, examples and tools that support adaptation rather than replication of practices.
- (e) **Strengthen learner engagement with learning outcomes.** Learners should be supported in understanding the purpose of learning outcomes and their role in guiding learning, progression and self-assessment.

4.2. Looking ahead: opportunities, risks and future research

Despite more than two decades of learning outcomes adoption across Europe, fundamental questions remain regarding how the transformation from intended to achieved learning outcomes occurs in practice, what conditions enable meaningful implementation, and how learning outcomes can support educational quality without becoming compliance-driven exercises. While the evidence presented in this study provides valuable insights into patterns and challenges across 10 European countries, it also highlights important gaps in current knowledge.

One of the most significant limitations concerns the lack of longitudinal evidence on implementation processes. Existing research frequently focuses on policy frameworks, curricula or institutional arrangements at a particular point in time, offering less insight into how learning outcomes become embedded in practice over longer periods. Future research could therefore examine how practitioner capacity develops over time, how institutions sustain implementation efforts, as well as how the learning outcomes approach can be maintained and adapted to changing labour market needs and evolving VET policies and systems.

The findings also point to the need for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that support successful implementation. Important questions remain regarding how practitioners develop the interpretive capacity required to apply

learning outcomes in diverse contexts, how flexible formulations can be balanced with consistency and comparability, and how learners' understanding of learning outcomes evolves throughout their educational pathways. Addressing these questions would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which learning outcomes support meaningful learning and competence development.

At the same time, rapid technological developments create new opportunities and challenges for learning outcomes-based approaches. Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing curriculum design, teaching, assessment and learner support. Future research could explore how AI might support the formulation, interpretation and implementation of learning outcomes, including the development of adaptive guidance tools, personalised learning pathways and enhanced assessment practices. Equally important is the need to examine potential risks, including excessive standardisation, reduced professional autonomy and the reinforcement of narrow interpretations of learning outcomes.

These developments suggest that the future challenge is not whether learning outcomes should continue to play a role in VET systems, but how they can remain relevant and meaningful within rapidly changing educational, technological and labour market environments. Continued research, experimentation and dialogue will therefore be essential to ensure that learning outcomes remain a tool for supporting learning, competence development and learner progression rather than becoming an end in themselves.

Abbreviations

EQF	European Qualification Framework
ESCO	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations
EU	European Union
IVET	Initial vocational education and training
VET	Vocational education and training

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Policy pointers for the shift to learning outcomes

Lessons from European VET systems

This Cedefop Insight proposes six policy pointers to support the implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches in initial vocational education and training. Drawing on evidence from 10 European countries, it examines the factors influencing the transformation of intended learning outcomes, as defined in curricula and policy documents, into achieved learning outcomes demonstrated by learners.

The analysis highlights the importance of balancing policy coherence with implementation flexibility, fostering professional dialogue, providing accessible implementation support, strengthening practitioner capacity, using quality assurance as a driver of improvement, and promoting responsive governance. Together, these policy pointers emphasise that learning outcomes implementation is not a linear or purely technical process but a systemic transformation requiring coordinated action across policy, institutional and practitioner levels.

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