



Third policy learning forum

Defining, writing and using learning outcomes

21 and 22 June 2018, Cedefop, Thessaloniki

Background paper

Scope of the policy learning forum

The learning outcomes approach is increasingly gaining ground in Europe and beyond (Cedefop, 2016) ⁽¹⁾. Used in different settings and for different purposes – ranging from qualifications frameworks to qualification standards, curricula and assessment criteria – learning outcomes influence the way teaching and learning is organised and carried out. This makes it increasingly important to reflect on the conceptual basis of the approach and its implications for policy and practice.

Cedefop published in 2017 its first European handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4156>

Building on discussions from the 2015 and 2016 policy learning forums, the learning outcomes handbook outlines the different uses of learning outcomes, points to the dilemmas involved in writing and using them, and proposes an array of practical ‘rules of thumb’. The 2018 policy learning forum will build on messages from the handbook while focusing on four main issues:

⁽¹⁾ Cedefop (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe*.
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074>

(a) Conceptual roots of the learning outcomes approach

The way learning outcomes are conceptualised influences their use in policy and practice. Learning outcomes approaches are often claimed to be shaped by ‘behaviouristic’ or ‘(social) constructivist’ theories of learning (Cedefop, 2016; Keevy and Chakroun, 2015) ⁽²⁾. The distinction between ‘strategic-instrumental’ and ‘communicative-deliberative’ rationality (Eriksen, 1999) ⁽³⁾ also captures this tension. A strategic-instrumental and/or behaviouristic approach sees learning outcomes as result-oriented, full-ended and measurable. A constructivist approach, emphasising the communicative-deliberative character of learning, calls attention to a need for learning outcomes to be open-ended, suggesting reduced measurability. The PLF will provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on these conceptual approaches and their implications for practice.

(b) The role of learning outcomes in governing education and training

Learning outcomes are used at policy level as a tool for governing, managing and reforming education and training. Some see learning outcomes as a way to manage regional and local practices centrally, strengthening the accountability of schools and teachers. Others see them as a way to put the focus on learners, providing teachers and students with tools for active and open learning. These policy choices, pointing to somewhat different directions, illustrate the relationship between the learning outcomes approach and management principles used in other policy areas (for example management by objectives, MBO). The question arises whether and how these opposites can be balanced. A key problem seems to lie in the fact that some stakeholders using learning outcomes only to a limited extent are aware of this tension and the dilemmas it poses. The PLF will provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on the use of learning outcomes for management and governance purposes – including on its relation to experiences from outside education and training – and on this basis, clarify what is relevant to education, training and learning.

(c) Learning outcomes as a common, international language

Learning outcomes approaches are increasingly used by countries across the world. This is for example reflected in the rapid growth of learning-outcomes-based qualifications frameworks over the past decade ⁽⁴⁾. Some claim that this points towards a common language facilitating comparability of qualifications and allowing education and training systems across the world to ‘speak’ more directly to each other. In cooperation with UNESCO, colleagues working with learning outcomes outside Europe will play an active part in the PLF.

⁽²⁾ Keevy, J.; Chakroun, B. (2015). *Level-setting and recognition of learning outcomes*. Paris: UNESCO.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002428/242887e.pdf>

⁽³⁾ Eriksen, E.O. (1999). *Kommunikativ ledelse*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

⁽⁴⁾ Cedefop; ETF; Unesco (2017). *Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks*. Vol. 1, Vol. 2. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/sl/publications-and-resources/publications/2222>

(d) Updating the handbook

Discussions on the topics above, particularly including international experts, will feed into revising and strengthening the 2017 learning outcomes handbook. A question to be discussed is whether the current 'European handbook' can and should be developed into an 'international handbook'.

Guiding questions informing the work of the policy learning forum

- (a) To what extent is the implementation of the learning outcomes approach based on an explicit conceptual perspective?
 - (i) What is the conceptual point of departure in your national context?
 - (ii) What are the strengths and weaknesses?
- (b) How is the tension between 'learning outcomes as result-oriented, measurable and objective' and 'learning outcomes as process-oriented, open to negotiation and only partly measurable' addressed in your national context?
- (c) Which factors positively/negatively influence the use of learning-outcomes in governance and policy-making?
- (d) Which factors positively/negatively influence the use of learning outcomes for teaching and learning?
- (e) How can the international cooperation on the definition and use of learning outcomes be strengthened?