



## Summary

### **Cedefop workshop: Making learning progression a reality – Learners in the spotlight**

**21 February 2024**

#### **Introduction**

The workshop presented and discussed the interim findings of the Cedefop project on transparency and transferability of learning outcomes.

Participants reflected on the progress made over the past two decades, discussed the barriers for individuals and sought to identify areas deserving attention in the coming years to facilitate lifelong and life wide learning. Participants (approximately 200) came from 40 different countries and included representatives of national qualification authorities and agencies, policy makers, researchers and many others.

“Recognising the importance of lifelong learning and understanding and what is needed to promote it is essential for encouraging individuals to upskill and to reskill, namely, to adapt to evolving labour market and societal needs and to navigate the green and the digital transition. While this is important for employability, it is also important for achieving personal fulfilment. We should not forget that the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights refers to everyone's right to lifelong learning, enabling them to fully participate in society and manage transitions in the labour market,” said **Jürgen Siebel, Executive Director, Cedefop**, in an opening speech.

The overall aim was to look at policy initiatives promoting transparency and transferability of learning outcomes over the last 20 years, from 2000 to 2020 and to examine the relationship and the extent to which they have contributed to developing more flexible learning systems and therefore improving opportunities for individual learners. The workshops also served to have initial discussions for the development of future policy scenarios towards 2040.

Background note available at: [https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/background\\_note\\_v.09.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/background_note_v.09.pdf)

#### **Relationships and impact of various initiatives at the European level**

The five thematic policy areas identified in the project were: quality assurance; credit accumulation and transfer; comparability of skills and qualifications; validation of non formal and informal learning; and recognition of qualifications.

In terms of some overall considerations about the relationship and impact of the various initiatives at the European level, **Zelda Azzarà, Cedefop expert**, stressed that, most of the tools are voluntary tools which triggered a voluntary process and the project shows significant commitment and changes across the EU, “depicting a successful story in European cooperation”. Most initiatives share similar goals and aims; however to ensure coherence also in their development and implementation sustained cooperation among stakeholders at different levels is needed. “Programmes, working groups and networks can really be quite a powerful tool to support what can be defined a bottom-up approach and the promotion

of synergies” she said. She also noted that the European qualifications framework, which spans education and training systems and validation of non-formal and informal learning, stand out as the European tools with the most extensive connections across policy initiatives analysed in the study.

In the period from 2000 to 2020, **Iraklis Pliakis, Cedefop expert**, said that “we noticed that, in the first decade, countries were usually setting the basis while, in the second decade, there were more concrete developments in most of the countries. National readiness played a key role. There were countries that were relatively more ready to implement these initiatives, while others followed, either after joining the EU, or in the context of EU orienting reforms”.

“What we have seen is that often progress has been more apparent in promoting comparability of skills and qualifications and a bit slower or limited to some sectors in credit accumulation and transfer, and in setting up validation arrangements. There were complex and varying interactions between the national level and the EU initiatives,” he said.

### **Summary panel discussion Transparency and transferability of learning outcomes: past achievements, current obstacles and way forward**

Chair and moderator: **Carita Blomqvist, Cedefop expert**

Panellists: **Koen Nomden, Team leader, DG EMPL, European Commission; Eduard Staudecker, Head of department, Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research; Brikena Xhomaqi, Director, Lifelong Learning Platform; Lauri Tuomi, Executive board member of the European Association for the Education of adults (EAEA) Executive board and CEO of the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation (KVS)**

#### **Successes**

A key element of the five areas presented in the Cedefop study is mobility; and panellists pointed out that in the last 20 years, the large number of initiatives developed and implemented have improved transparency and contributed to mobility and employability pushing to move from theory to practice. There has been progress when it comes to more and better cooperation across sectors or a better understanding of the different forms of education for formal, non-formal, and informal. There has also been progress when it comes to the learner-centred approach.

It is important to consider learning from the different sectors of education together, i.e. from early childhood to higher to adult education said **Brikena Xhomaqi, Director, Lifelong Learning Platform**. She added that “at the beginning it was almost impossible to bring all those sectors together to talk to each other, to work and to have a common language. But now we can see that they work together, they can cooperate together, they can do a lot of projects together. And thanks, of course, to the Erasmus plus programme and other tools like EQF, they can find common grounds for cooperation. So definitely, we can see in practice that that has actually had a very positive impact on the on the sector”.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)<sup>(1)</sup> was considered by most speakers as a key development, an international reference point and an integral part of the broader landscape of EU policies and tools with the potential to have a sustainable effect on the European educational landscape. It was described by **Koen Nomden, Team leader, DG EMPL, European Commission**, as the core EU tool on transparency and transferability of learning outcomes but he underlined that “it can only operate if it's works in good synergy with other tools”.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>

NQFs and the EQF make it easier to compare qualifications within the EU (e.g. on a learner's certificate, they might have level 5, which is comparable with other level 5 qualifications in the EU) and also to compare qualifications from outside the EU. Other features of the EQF include its broad acceptance among institutions working with qualifications, its openness to qualifications from non-formal learning and formal learning, its 8 levels and learning outcomes' descriptors, and last but not least its neutrality (it has no qualification types assigned to it). The most recent NQF inventory by Cedefop <sup>(2)</sup> showed that national frameworks are becoming more operational. Implementation stage is operational for 23 countries while 13 are in activation stage, the situation is positive, but more work needs to be done.

Pointing to the good role of the EQF, **Eduard Staudecker, Head of department, Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research**, said: "The EQF needs time. I'm absolutely convinced that this will be a project that has a big sustainable effect on the European educational landscape." "And a big push for the Austrian system is that now we have a law for higher VET in the coming years" he added.

**Lauri Tuomi, Executive board member of the European Association for the Education of adults (EAEA) Executive board and CEO of the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation (KVS)** said: "I think that it's a very good idea to continue sharing the best practices between countries. And, in this respect, the work Cedefop is doing is excellent." One of the big steps in the European non-formal approach to adult education came in 2021, when the Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning was launched. Those are the framework, documents or strategies which have an effect on the lifelong learning approach in countries. These are frameworks that the European Association for the Education of Adults discuss continuously, with this question in mind: How could we implement those principles in practice in order to keep lifelong learning approach fresh in in our society?

### **Challenges/barriers**

A major barrier for achieving a lifelong learning approach has been the silos and differences among sectors. According to panellists, organisations and education and training stakeholders still see a lot of barriers in terms of cooperating with each other. There has been a lack of coherence among policies and sometimes also different speeds of effectiveness in the different sectors (e.g. higher education has progressed a lot faster than other sectors).

In terms of the learner-centred approach, although improvements, learners are still not fully and equally included in the decision-making in the education and training institutions that they are part of, due to missing ecosystems. Lagging behind with participation, can be considered a problem for policies to be effective.

Equal consideration and value for formal, non-formal and informal learning is not yet there, despite their importance for today's diverse contexts. As learners have difference needs and they come and go from the education and learning environments at the different stages of their life, improved integration among different forms of learning is underscored, Enhancing the connections between formal, non-formal and informal would foster more flexible learning pathways, better suited to accommodate the evolving needs of all learners.

The implementation of the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning <sup>(3)</sup> has not progress as much as we would have wished, noted panellist. There has been progress in validation arrangements across countries but there is still a lack of awareness of validation and the overall validation landscape in countries and across Europe is fragmented.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

When it comes to credits, success has not been as big as expected, especially when it comes to European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and its comparability with European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) has never been easy.

Another challenge raised by the panellists concerned the relevance and potential purposes of the EQF which are not so clear to employees and to individuals. The real challenge of the EQF is to reach the individual.

Learning offers are becoming more diverse (e.g. the qualification landscape is becoming more diverse), which means more fragmentation and questions related to the relevance of qualifications and qualifications' frameworks.

The progress made in terms of quality assurance has also been linked to a further increase in the administrative burden without the necessary counselling and guidance for the learners to navigate these different initiatives. A question for individuals is how to find a way in the complex landscape of learning offers, which requires more career guidance.

Recognition is a major challenge, with the word itself very much avoided in European discussions 15 years ago. It needs to be discussed, including in the context of higher education and VET programmes.

### **Next steps**

The relevance and importance of sharing good practice, EU cooperation, informed discussions, knowledge hubs, etc was noted. Experiments in European collaboration need to be pursued. It is a very good idea to continue sharing best practices between countries, something which Cedefop has strongly supported in the years.

In terms of the silos, it is important to continue the effort to break them, making the tools and initiatives more open to different sectors.

Focussing on implementation rather than new initiatives was suggested as new initiatives may lead to progress and improvement, but they may also lead to an increased administrative burden. So the key is not to develop new tools but to implement existing tools. And, while there have been a lot of initiatives, sometimes we have missed seeing how they build on each other.

It was also pointed out that it can be relevant to have new policy initiatives as a way to keep our societies active and also to keep them fresh in thinking about lifelong learning in each period of time. Certainly, it is very important that lifelong learning initiatives and policy discussion is a continuum.

We need to see how each sector related in an initiative can actually take a lifelong learning approach taking a holistic approach. How can it accommodate learners that are not typical of that sector? Panellists noted that these are questions that should be asked when building new initiatives, reflecting on how to connect them with each other. Non formal, informal and formal learning should be seen equally on a lifelong learning perspective.

A learner focus is important. In that context, a focus on transversal skills and competences (e.g. digital or green competences), is necessary. And here, focus could be put on teachers in non-formal education and training, who often work part time, in order to raise awareness of creating competence-based and learner-centred curricula. Also in this context, the world is changing so fast that we need skills for the working life but we also need skills to navigate life and changing society.

Digital transformation (issuing qualifications and other learning achievements as digital credentials makes them and the learning outcomes more transparent) – it can boost understanding of them and their recognition.

Opening up qualifications' frameworks (this is happening, with more and more countries opening up their NQFs to qualifications from outside the formal domain) - the landscape of qualifications is growing and is transforming.

Adding ESCO skills to learning outcomes of qualifications such as in qualifications' registers would also boost transparency.

European mobility is key – all the instruments should support more mobility, more European cooperation. The hope was expressed that, especially in the Erasmus Plus programme, many mobilities in the next years in the VET system will be the result of all these transparency tools.

At the broad stakeholder level, especially at the social partner level in Austria, validation is a huge topic when it comes to integration and the labour market, when it comes to new models for people who are unemployed.

More steps should be made towards increasing links between initiatives on recognition of qualifications (e.g. the Directive on recognition of qualifications, giving access to regulated professions, barely has references to the EQF), especially in the VET area.

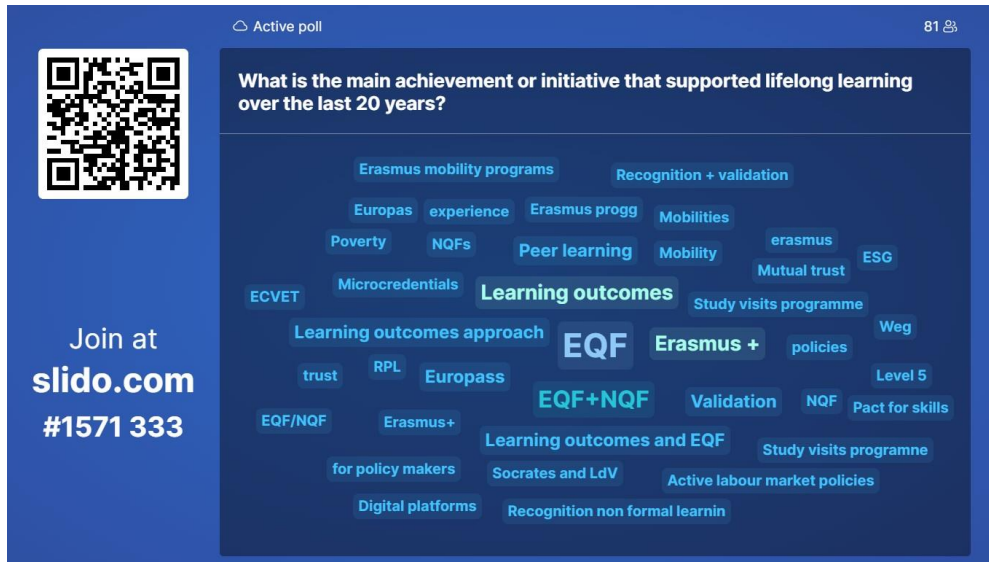
Summing up the discussion, the chair and moderator, **Carita Blomqvist, Cedefop expert**, said that most speakers had referred to “‘a golden triangle’ of qualifications' frameworks, quality assurance and recognition, with these three big policy areas working together and the importance of having them together”. She noted that recognition was also mentioned as a problematic area with these other two big policy areas to support recognition.

With no one on the panel directly referring to ‘mutual trust’, which she saw as a sign of the success of the processes that we are experiencing right now, she said that “maybe we can be happy as maybe it means that, during these 20 years or so, we have managed to create tools and cooperation and groups of people coming together so much that we don't need to try to problematise anymore so much what creates mutual trust”. However, “we should not forget it,” she cautioned.

## Slido poll

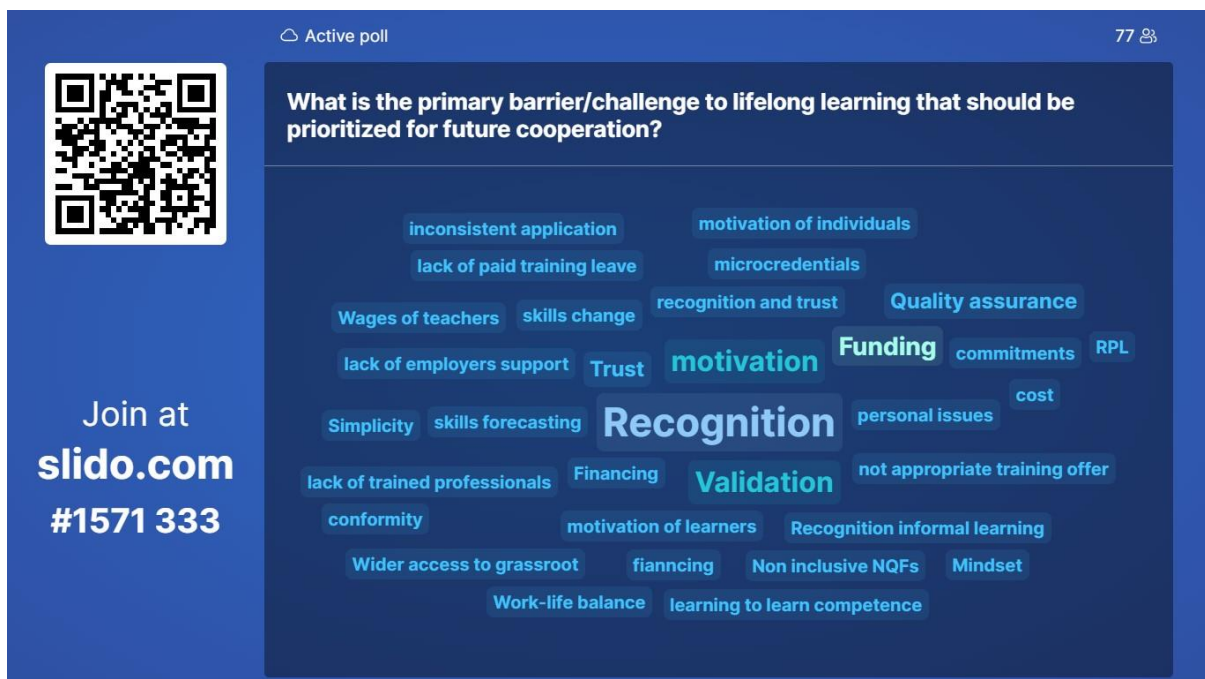
**Slido 1:** Participants were asked to reply to two questions  
What is the main achievement or initiative that supported lifelong learning over the last 20 years?

All the answers are in the slido image below. EQF attracted most votes followed by learning outcomes/learning outcomes approach, EQF + NQF, Erasmus +, validation, study visits programme, peer learning, Europass and microcredentials.



**Slido 2:** What is the primary challenge to lifelong learning that should be priorities for future cooperation on the national level, EU level, organisational level, stakeholder level?

All the answers are in the slido image below. Recognition and funding attracted most votes followed by validation, motivation, funding/financing, non-inclusive NQFs, trust and quality assurance.



## Ongoing work: changes for citizens in 2000-20 and future policy scenarios

**Kari Hadjivassiliou, Project leader, Tavistock Institut gGmbH** gave a presentation on the state of play with the project. She set out some of the preliminary findings.

### Successes

Greater flexibility and permeability of learning pathways in formal education and training, both horizontally within VET and between general education and VET, and vertically from upper secondary VET to higher VET and higher education.

An improved ability of learners to enter formal education and training and combine formal, non formal and informal learning.

Increased learning mobility between countries, especially in higher education - the success of Erasmus Plus is well known - and increasingly VET.

### Key obstacles/challenges

Inconsistency in the description and application of learning outcomes across education and training sectors, which has an adverse impact on comparability and transferability of learning outcomes.

Cumbersome and complex recognition procedures at both system and institutional level - the automatic recognition of qualifications across the European higher education area countries remains a major challenge.

Persisting social economic inequalities - learners from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit less from learning participation and learning mobility. In other words, those learners who need learning and lifelong learning most are less likely to get it or to have opportunities to engage with it.

For work assignment 4 (scenarios on lifelong learning), key questions have included identifying what have been the prevailing trends and priorities in supporting lifelong learning through the transferability, transparency of learning outcomes and how these past trends might influence and shape future European and national development and lifelong learning. The path dependency approach was adopted, in terms of policy for design and formulation, in this work assignment.

Interim reflections (to be further discussed) included identification of the following trends:

Trend 1: There has been an increase in transparency and comparability of qualifications. And here, the EQF has been instrumental.

Trend 2: There has been increased use of modular approaches in education and training, which in itself has increased flexibility of learning systems.

Trend 3: There are increased ways to receive and accumulate credit for achieved learning outcomes.

Trend 4: There's been an increased transferability of learning outcomes. And here, also, validation has helped in some cases.

Trend 5: There is increased recognition of learning outcomes, with the aim of enhancing the mobility of EU citizens and increasingly third country nationals.

Initial thinking on how to develop the national and EU level scenarios was presented to participants.

## **Breakout session 1: European policy initiatives on transparency and transferability of learning outcomes: synergies, success and future pathways**

**Chair: Zeldà Azzarà, Expert, Cedefop**

**Rapporteur: Maya Ivanova, Policy Officer, European Commission**

### **Summary key points**

In terms of the EU policy initiatives and tools, there has been overlap in aims and objectives but some differences when it comes to the development and the implementation.

As for way forward, key is the process of implementation and how we coordinate these tools in a better way. This is where sharing information comes into play. EU level cooperation in terms of more mutual learning, based on concrete examples that can be inspirational and practices from other countries sharing experience are key for the implementation of these different tools. In general, improving information sharing for the different groups responsible for these tools and initiatives can be very helpful. This is a success factors in terms of creating synergies. It is key to bring networks and different groups and leaders together when discussing implementation. In addition, the link between research results in that domain and the policy making at both European and national level can be strengthened and more feedback can be integrated from the different monitoring processes that exist. The different results can be also taken into consideration in this implementation process.

A major theme is the need to improve permeability between education and training sectors and, in general, recognition across borders. In that context, creating mutual trust with the different initiatives and how things are done between countries is key. Mutual learning is key, including explaining the processes at national level.

Another improvement would be to improve communication, not only towards the expert audience, but also towards the broader public. That would include how the results and the outcomes of these tools are being communicated.

## **Breakout session 2: Past and present barriers to lifelong and life-wide learning**

**Chair: Iraklis Pliakis, Expert, Cedefop**

**Rapporteur: Ernesto Villalba Garcia, Expert, Cedefop**

### **Summary key points**

The main outcomes of the first preliminary findings of the work were presented. This is basically about the impact of all these policies on individuals and how it has changed the different way that people can access and transfer learning.

The differences between higher education and VET (which is translated into the differences in the social value of certain qualifications and certain professions) has been a persistent barrier over the years and is still a barrier.

More work is needed on the permeability between the different systems (e.g. better systems of credits, developing better links between qualifications awarded outside formal education and training and the formal frameworks).

Another barrier is that a lot of work within education and training subsystems is done in silos whereas we need to work more together.

Another issue is the need to better finance lifelong and life-wide learning.

Another barrier is that there is still a lot of administrative work for many of these procedures of recognition and validation; they should become lighter.

Another issue is how the diversity in the implementation of the learning-outcomes approach makes it very complicated to work. The NQF and EQF approach have helped to connect better or make better use of these learning outcomes. But there is still a lot of discussion about input in terms of time, e.g., that people spent in a specific qualification in a specific programme. This is still a barrier. There needs to be more consistency on the learning outcomes' approach.

One of the main problems is that there is still a lack of use [of lifelong and life-wide learning], especially with regard to validation. In that context, the idea of parity of system is important because, the more that people know, the better they are able to understand the value of different qualifications.

Also important is to train teachers and other people involved in these kinds of transferability processes, because it's important that they are trained in order to be able to use the tools for transparency better.

### **Breakout session 3: Exploring past and present trends and their influence on future policy developments on lifelong learning**

**Chair: Anastasia Pouliou, Cedefop**

**Rapporteur: Nicola Stokes, Deputy project leader, Tavistock Institut gGmbH**

#### **Summary key points**

Learning outcomes was highlighted as being the underlying concept underpinning all trends.

The key is to have a more common understanding and promotion of learning outcomes. This will lead to increased awareness of the EQF and NQFs, better communication between countries and systems and more understanding of other countries' systems and approaches.

The focus on learning outcomes has led to an increase in recognition but there is still a long way to go and this seems as one of the weaker trends over the past couple of decades.

A future trend might be to focus more on specific learning outcomes such as transversal learning outcomes or democratic competences.

Mutual trust is going to be a key condition to enable us to move forwards - this might lead to enhancing recognition at the EU level in future.

An observed trend is towards the number of outreach measures addressed to vulnerable groups. However, a lot of the initiatives have not managed to reach those who need them the most. A future trend might be more targeted policies focused on ensuring they reach vulnerable groups.

In terms of the national level, NQFs and other overarching policy and legal tools have been a major trend over the past couple of decades. The increasing flexibilization of learning and investment in digital learning technologies, which has been occurring over the past two decades, is likely to be a future trend.

Another has been the focus more on the system level rather than the institutional or the individual level. A future trend might be to take more into consideration the needs of individuals and their aspirations.

## **Concluding remarks**

**Zelda Azzarà, Cedefop expert**

**Loukas Zahilas, Head of Department, Cedefop**

In her observations about the three breakout sessions as a whole, **Zelda Azzarà, Cedefop expert**, singled out, among the main points raised, the need to ensure coherence, to build on different initiatives and to think about the other sectors when developing initiatives in a specific area. She highlighted the EQF and the NQF as being among the most successful tools and stressed the importance of sharing information. She also underlined the importance of paying attention to recognition in the future and to improving synergies, as, in the end, the recognition of skills and qualifications is what learners want and need.

**Loukas Zahilas, Head of Department, Cedefop**, stressed as Cedefop believes that the project on transparency and transferability of learning outcomes can shed light on the impact of European and national policy initiatives in terms of institutional and system changes, and perhaps they can make a difference even at the individual level. The project has been an opportunity to have more informed discussions on choices available for future policies, practices and developments that can cover both European and national levels.

The event was an opportunity to travel back to European cooperation – a 20 year journey - but always with a view to the future. These issues were discussed many years ago at the transparency forum in 2002. And all these issues are still prevalent in the current agenda. But they follow a maturity and evolution process. And this is the way EU cooperation progresses. ‘It is a rough road full of problems, full of surprises. And working together brings successes and even failures. It is not only success stories that bring us to a brighter future, but also failures’ Loukas Zahilas stressed.

“And as my beloved Samuel Beckett mentioned, ever tried, ever failed. No matter. Try again, fail again. Fail better,” he said.

The next step will be to have the final results of the study in an event early next year.

## Concluding observations

The aim of the workshop was to present and discuss interim findings of the transparency and transferability of learning outcomes project in order to stimulate **reflection on strengths and weaknesses in pursuing lifelong learning**.

Panellists and participants agreed on the added value of reflecting on what has worked well and what has not, emphasising the value of **learning from past experiences to inform future actions** and strategies.

It was acknowledged that **significant progress** has been made over the last 20 years in enhancing the transparency and portability of qualifications. Despite improvements, **challenges to learners' mobility remain**, including the importance of breaking down silos between different education and training systems, ensuring that no learner and no type of learning is left behind, and the need to maintain a high level of attention on the importance of lifelong learning.

When looking back at the past **achievements/most successful aspects of EU cooperation** in the field, the learning outcomes approach and the European Qualifications Framework were highlighted as the most successful developments, described as 'neutral tools' that span across education and training subsystems.

The importance of fully **implementing existing tools** such as National Qualifications Frameworks, promoting validation arrangements for non-formal and informal learning and leveraging digital developments for the portability of learning was emphasised.

As for the **future and synergies to be further exploited**, strengthening relationships between quality assurance, **qualifications frameworks and recognition of skills and qualifications**, especially for learning taking place outside formal systems, is a way to support mobility for all individuals.

The need to **build on existing EU initiatives and tools** and to **ensure a coherent policy framework** that centre on **individuals** as well as to work on increasing individuals' awareness of available options and to work on reducing administrative burdens connected to recognition of skills and qualifications was stressed various times.

The workshop was also an opportunity to **engage in initial discussions on the development of alternative policy scenarios towards 2040**. The **shift towards individualised comprehensive and flexible learning** was a major part of the discussion.