A handbook for defining and writing learning outcomes – Key messages and progress

38 EQF AG – 8th December 2016
The context of the Handbook

• The handbook is launched in a situation where there is broad political agreement on the need for and usefulness of learning outcomes.

• Strong political agreement does not in itself guarantee that learning outcomes are written and applied in ways which benefit end-users.

• The success of learning outcomes requires a clearer understanding of opportunities, challenges and dilemmas facing stakeholders in this area.
this statement is not entirely clear.

In my view - strong political agreement does not necessarily translate into practical and operational arrangements that would benefit end-users, including on how LO are written for different purposes.

PEVEC GRM, Slava; 07/12/2016
The structure of the Handbook

The Handbook will be structured into three main parts

- The first part outlines a limited number of basic principles and ‘rules of thumb’ supporting the definition, writing and use of learning outcomes
- The second part provides an in-depth discussion on topics of particular importance, building on practical experience and research
- The third part presents examples of learning outcomes, illustrating part one and two
- The fourth part gives access to guidance material and research already available across Europe in different languages
Key message 1 - Fit for purpose

Learning outcomes are written for different purposes.

• The learning outcomes descriptors used by a national qualifications framework differs significantly from those used in a qualification profile/standard, a programme description, a curriculum or in an assessment standard.

• Learning outcomes have to be ‘fit for purpose’ and the level of detail/granularity and generality/specificity will have to reflect this.
Key message 2 – the distinction between intended and actually achieved learning outcomes

• We distinguish between intended and actually achieved learning outcomes

• Consistent and high quality definition and writing of learning outcomes requires continuous dialogue between intended and actual outcomes

• A feed-back loop is needed; statements of intended learning outcomes must be continuously reviewed and improved in light of the actually achieved outcomes
Key message 3 - The different conceptual roots of learning outcomes

The writing of learning outcomes operates in a tension between behaviouristic and constructivist schools of thought

• The behaviouristic tradition will emphasise learning outcomes as result oriented, full-ended, clearly observable and (objectively) measurable,

• The constructivist approach will emphasise the need for learning outcomes to be process-oriented and open-ended, somewhat limiting measurability.
Key message 4 - The need for flexibility and local adaptation

• Learning outcomes need to be defined and written in a way which allows for local adaptation and interpretation by teachers and learners.

• Too detailed and prescriptive statements can undermine and lead to a ‘dumbing down’ of the learning and assessment process.

• There is a need to balance (local) autonomy and (centralised) regulation.
Key message 5 - The vertical dimension

- Learning outcomes statement - combining action verb/object/context - need to be articulated along a vertical and a horizontal dimension

- Introducing the **vertical dimension** of learning outcomes statements is about indicating the level and complexity of learning

- This will normally require referring to a (implicit or explicit) hierarchy of intended learning outcomes and achievements.
Key message 6 - The horizontal dimension

• Introducing the horizontal dimension of learning outcomes statements is about clarifying the object and the scope of the intended learning; are we (for example) focusing mainly on theoretical knowledge or are we addressing practical or analytical skills?

• Are we using pre-defined domains (for example knowledge, skills and competence) when writing learning outcomes?

• The choice of action verbs is important; different alternatives need to be shown
Key message 7 - Teaching and Learning

- The implementation of learning outcomes depends on a clear link being established between the learning outcomes statements and the learning and teaching process.

- Learning outcomes statements should assist teachers in identifying and combining teaching methods.
Key message 8 - Assessment

• The link between learning outcomes statements and assessment points to a tension between reliability and validity.

• It should be made clear that learning outcomes, written as threshold statements, do not prevent learners to go beyond these thresholds.

• Learning outcomes orient a learning process; they should not contain or restrict it.
Open up and enable learning?

Measurable and objective outcomes?

Outcomes focussed on process

Limit and restrict learning?

Prescribe and control learning

Allow local adaptation of learning?
Next steps

• Cedefop’s 2nd Policy Learning Forum on the definition and writing of learning outcomes October 2016 gathered experts from 28 countries discussing and developing the draft Handbook

• Based on the input to the PLF, a revised version will be finalised by the end of the year

• The EQF AG will be given the possibility to comment on the Handbook before publishing

• Regular updates envisaged
Please consult: