Follow up to the draft European Handbook on Learning Outcome

A COMMON EUROPEAN FORMAT FOR PRESENTING LEARNING OUTCOMES BASED QUALIFICATIONS

The 2016 proposal by the European Commission on the revision of the EQF therefore states the following:

‘(The Commission) in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders (should develop) a standard format for the description of learning outcomes to be used for comparison purposes.’

The draft European Handbook on “Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes” (Cedefop 2017) provides an initial outline of how such a format can be designed and the purposes for which it can be applied. Based on this outline the EQF AG is invited to advice on how to best progress on this topic.

Added value of a common format for the description of learning outcomes

While many countries have made significant progress in using learning outcomes to describe and present their qualifications (1), existing approaches differ in length and focus and makes comparison difficult. Agreeing on a common format for presenting qualifications would make it easier for learners, employees and employers to compare qualifications across institutional, sectoral and national borders. A common European presentation format could serve the following purposes:

- Make it possible for individual citizens, employers and other end-users to be able to understand and compare what is offered by a qualification;
- Allow for a systematic exchange of information on content and profile of single, specific qualifications throughout Europe;

(1) See for example Belgium Flanders
Further promote the shift to learning outcomes to support transparency of qualifications.

The purpose of the common format is not harmonization of qualifications. The format should instead make it easier for end-users, be these individual citizens or employers, to make sense of the existing diversity of qualifications in Europe.

**Principles to be applied**

A common format for presenting learning outcomes can be seen as deepening the approach to increased transparency of qualifications as promoted by the EQF. Such common format would go beyond the information on levels offered by the EQF and provide comparable information on the content and profile of particular qualifications.

A common format is in particular relevant to future developments of qualifications supplements (Europass certificate supplement, Europass Diploma supplement) and national qualifications databases (\(^2\)). According to previous discussions in the EQF Advisory Group, a common format could be developed applying the following principles:

- It should not replace existing learning outcomes descriptions as used at national or institutional level for qualifications, curricula or other purposes;
- It should be used on a voluntary basis;
- It should allow national authorities to present the content and profile of qualifications, e.g. in certificate supplements and national qualifications databases/registers in a concise and comparable way;
- It should, potentially, also allow private and international providers to present their certificates and qualifications in a concise and comparable way.

**Technical and conceptual requirements to the format**

Initial discussions on the common format point to the following technical requirements:

- It should be short (+/- 1000 characters) and understandable. This volume-indication reflects existing practises, for example related to Europass certificate-supplements.
- It should follow a pre-defined structure and syntax to be agreed by the EQF AG. This is critical for ensuring comparability of presentations. As illustrated by the Cedefop European Handbook, existing applications of learning outcomes across Europe make it possible to identify the key elements of such a structure.

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(\(^2\)) Developing a common format is linked to the agreed common ‘data-model’ for the collection, presentation and sharing of information on qualifications in national databases. The description of the learning outcomes play a particularly important role as it provides a direct insight into the profile and content of the qualifications, as expressed through intended learning outcomes. The data-model consist of 15 **obligatory fields** (Title of qualifications, Country/Region (code), EQF-level, NQF-level, Learning outcomes description, Awarding body, Further information on qualification, Source of information, Link to supplements, URL, Information language (code), Entry requirements, Date of expiry, Ways to acquire qualification and Link to occupation) and 3 **optional fields** (Credit Points, Volume of learning and Accreditation and other Quality assurance processes).
It should refer to agreed but flexible learning domains. While some countries may choose to use the EQF domains (knowledge, skills and autonomy/responsibility) as basis for their descriptions, countries and institutions should choose the distinctions they find most appropriate.

It must be supported by a standardised terminology, including lists of action verbs. Cedefop has published, supporting Europass. This is further strengthened by the 2017 European Handbook

The following basic structure could be used as a starting point for developments:

**Table 1. The basic structure of a common format**

| It should present the qualification from the perspective of the learner and what he/she is expected to know, be able to do and understand | It should use action verbs to signal the level of learning expected, normally with an (explicit or implicit) reference to the levels of the national qualifications framework and/or the EQF | It should indicate the object and scope of the expected learning outcomes. This description should capture the main orientation of the qualification and the depth/breadth of the expected accomplishment. It can, if deemed appropriate, use pre-defined domains as defined by NQFs/EQF | It should clarify the occupational and/or social context in which the qualification operates |

The following example illustrates how the structure could be used in practice:

**Table 20. Example of application of common presentation format**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The learner</th>
<th>The verb</th>
<th>The object and scope</th>
<th>The context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The master of occupational therapy science</td>
<td>- has insight into</td>
<td>- the organization of health care</td>
<td>at regional, national and international level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He/She can critically test and give advice. He/she is able to take responsibility for the organization and progress of occupational therapy from the perspective of the principles of management and quality assurance of therapeutic interventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>He/She</th>
<th>- can critically test</th>
<th>- these insights in the field</th>
<th>from the perspective of the principles of management and quality assurance of therapeutic interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- can give advice</td>
<td>- on policy for the organization and progress of occupational therapy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- is able to take responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be presented in summary (416 characters)

The master of occupational therapy science has insight into the organization of health care at regional, national and international level and can critically test these insights in the field and give advice on policy. He/she is able to take responsibility for the organization and progress of occupational therapy from the perspective of the principles of management and quality assurance of therapeutic interventions.

The above proposal leaves significant room for institutions and countries to present their qualifications. The indicated structure, supported by a clear indication of volume, a set of action verbs and agreed guidance material, however, will significantly improve transparency.

The proposal should also be actively promoted for the use by private and international bodies, thus making it easier to understand and compare the certificates and qualifications so far not covered by national qualifications frameworks.

Conclusions

The EQF AG is invited to comment on the relevance of the proposed common format, in particular regarding:

- the basic purposes of the common format;
- the underpinning principles of the common format; and
- the suggested structure of the common format.

The EQF AG is invited to advice on how to best progress as regards the common format.