Taking forward the work on learning outcomes - Further development of the European Handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes

Recent studies (1) show that most European countries now define and describe their qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, focussing on what learners are expected to know, be able to do and understand. The adoption of the EQF in 2008, and the subsequent implementation of learning outcomes based national qualifications frameworks, has played a key role in promoting this approach. Not only do the qualification framework descriptors indicate (on the vertical axis) how the complexity, depth and breadth of learning outcomes increase from lowest to highest levels, they also (on the horizontal axis) point to the important relationship between domains of learning outcomes, notably between knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy.

Learning outcomes supporting transparency and comparability of qualifications

The big majority of countries working on the EQF agree that the shift to learning outcomes increases overall transparency and makes it easier to understand and value the content and profile of qualifications. The focus on learning outcomes allows for a better description of existing education and training provisions, making it easier for learners and employers to manoeuvre within increasingly complex systems.

Learning outcomes supporting development and reform of education, training and learning

A growing number of countries see the shift to learning outcomes as enabling reform and modernisation of education and training systems. The focus on outcomes introduces a common language potentially improving the dialogue between education and training institutions and their ‘customers’ in the labour market and society in general. This is critical for better matching of skills needs and provisions and can strengthen the overall relevance and quality of qualifications. The focus on outcomes furthermore makes it possible to more clearly signal to teachers, trainers and learners what is expected from them, demonstrating how learning outcomes can be used to support the quality of learning itself.

Deepening the implementation of learning outcomes

While qualifications frameworks have played a significant role in taking forward learning outcomes, they cannot operate in isolation. For learning outcomes to strengthen transparency and promote reform, the learning outcomes of frameworks must interact (align) with the learning used in qualification standards, curricula and assessment specifications. Put in another way, for the learning outcomes approach to make a difference, it must reach and inspire teachers, trainers and learners.

Key questions informing the further implementation of learning outcomes

The March 2018 EQF conference discussed progress as regards the implementation of learning outcomes and focussed on the following four questions:

- To what extent is the learning outcome approach implemented and; which factors have prevented and/or supported implementation?
- To what extent and how can the learning outcomes approach support the quality of teaching and learning?
- To what extent and how can the learning outcomes approach support the matching of skills needs and provisions and thus the overall relevance of qualifications?
- How can learning outcomes based qualifications frameworks support modernisation of education and training systems in the next decade?

The debate showed that while countries are making progress, there is a clear need for further cooperation and guidance in this area.

The PLA on intended and achieved learning outcomes that will be organised on 19-20 April will address in particular the following questions

a) To what extent are the learning outcomes based descriptors used in qualifications frameworks influencing the teaching and training process?

b) To what extent is the learning outcomes approach influencing the assessment process?

c) To what extent is the learning outcomes approach influencing the dialogue (feed-back-loops) between education and training and the users of qualifications in the labour market and society?

The European Handbook on the definition, writing and application of learning outcomes – possible further developments

In 2017 Cedefop, in close dialogue with the EQF AG, published the European handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes. Building on the 2011 EQF Guidance note 4 on ‘Using learning outcomes’, it serves three main purposes:

1. It outlines and exemplifies how learning outcomes can be written for different purposes and how the overall impact of the approach requires alignment; meaning that the learning outcomes written for a qualifications framework must interact with the learning outcomes written (for example) for qualification standards and assessment criteria. Alignment is of key importance to the implementation of qualification frameworks; a learning outcomes approach isolated and limited to national and European level descriptors will play only a limited role.

2. It seeks to identify not only the opportunities faced when using learning outcomes but also the serious challenges involved. Learning outcomes can be used to promote active and creative
learning but can also provide a negative influence, limiting rather than broadening learning processes.

3. It provides an overview over existing guidance and research material in this area, supporting practitioners and policy makers in further developing the approach.

**Making the Handbook a reference point for European and international cooperation**

For the Handbook to support the use of learning outcomes it needs to be regularly updated and enriched through a cooperation process involving European as well as international experts.

The following two concrete steps are suggested:

- Cedefop will organise two expert workshops (policy learning fora) supporting this update (2018 and 2019). The 2018 workshop will be carried out in cooperation with UNESCO, also involving experts from outside Europe.
- A peer learning activity on the role of learning outcomes in the implementation of the EQF to be organised mid-2019, directly supporting the update of the Handbook.

The EQF AG should be actively involved in this process, and developments on learning outcomes and the Handbook should be a regular part of the EQF AG’s Agenda (in line with fiche D of the EQF AG Work Programme).

A second edition of the Handbook should be co-published by the Commission and Cedefop late 2019/early 2020 and also serve as an EQF Guidance note.

- The EQG AG is invited to comment on how to take forward learning outcomes and where they see the need for further guidance and cooperation.
- The EQF AG is invited to comment on the current version of the Handbook, as well as on the outlined plan for revision.