



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

The shift to learning outcomes – a critical condition for validation of non-formal and informal learning

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**Jens Bjornavold,
Cedefop**

The learning outcomes approach – the overall context



The learning outcomes definition

A learning outcome is a statement of what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand after having completed a learning process

Learning outcomes must be fit for purpose

Learning outcomes are used for many different purposes Their application matters greatly and there is no 'one size for all'.

From statements of intention to achieved outcomes

The added value of the learning outcomes approach lies in the translation of intentions into achieved outcomes - competences



The use of learning outcomes

A new Cedefop study (based on research carried out between 2013-15) demonstrates that the shift to learning outcomes is now gaining speed across Europe.

- National qualifications frameworks
- Using learning outcomes to define and describe national qualifications
- Using learning outcomes in curricula
- Using learning outcomes in assessment practices
- As a reference point for validation

Significant progress the last 5 years (Cedefop study 2009)





Learning outcomes in European education and training policies

- The learning outcomes principle is – explicitly since 2004 – systematically promoted in the EU policy agenda for **education, training and employment**.
- The learning outcomes principle can be seen as the **‘glue’** binding together a wide range of initiatives taken during recent years.
- Europass, the EQF, ECTS, ECVET, ESCO, as a basis for validation.....



Expectations at policy level

- Transparency
- Relevance and quality
- Accountability
- Opens up to non-formal and informal learning

Expectations at the level of practitioners

- Sets clear targets for the learner
- Motivational effect
- Flexible learning pathways
- Guiding principle for teachers
- Orientation to assessment

Concerns at policy level

- ✓ Are Learning outcomes a policy hype/a big PR exercise?
- ✓ Are LOs legitimate?
- ✓ Are LO monitored and reviewed?
- ✓ Are LOs a way to impose objectives top down, reducing local and institutional autonomy?
- ✓ Do we impose bureaucracy?

Concerns at practitioner level

- ✓ Do we risk to reduce the scope and richness of learning?
- ✓ Do we undermine the vision of open and active learning?
- ✓ Is consistency between institutions reduced?
- ✓ Do we decrease rather than increase transparency



**Learning outcomes and validation
of non-formal and informal learning
– key issues**

- ✓ Validation of non-formal and informal learning requires a reference point – a ‘standard’ in relation to which identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning can take place
- ✓ The existence of a clear reference point is of particular importance when validation leads to a formal qualification (summative assessment)
- ✓ If the standard refers to particular teaching inputs and learning contexts, or duration of learning – important learning will be automatically excluded
- ✓ A standard referring to learning outcomes – specifying what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand – makes it possible to carry out validation independently of particular learning inputs or contexts



- ✓ The application of the learning outcomes approach to standards matters
 - ✓ Too narrow definitions can exclude important learning experiences
 - ✓ Too general definitions can influence the reliability of validation

- ✓ The overall credibility of validation can be affected by the way standards are used and learning outcomes applied
 - ✓ Lack of a visible standard undermines credibility
 - ✓ The commitment of key-stakeholders to standards affect their value
 - ✓ Outdated standard and/or with limited relevance weaken credibility
 - ✓ The existence of different standards for formal education and for validation can result in 'A' and 'B' certificates.

What's next?



Can learning outcomes facilitate validation?

The 2012 Recommendation stresses that validation of non formal learning should build on the same learning outcomes based standards as those used for traditional qualifications

- How can LO descriptions be written to capture the diversity of non-formal and informal learning? How can we balance generality and specificity?
- How can LO descriptions be written to capture the relevant learning domains? How can we balance requirements to, for example, knowledge and skills? How can overview and a holistic approach be expressed?
- How can performance requirements and criteria be written in a way which appreciates non-standardised learning?



Can learning outcomes facilitate validation?

The experiences from writing assessment criteria are relevant

- Lack of ambiguity is a key
- Reflected choice of action verbs
- Brief statements - one action verb
- Focus on observable learning and explicit manifestations of learning

A risk that statements become too detailed and prescriptive and not open to non-standardised learning?

A risk that 'observable' learning is defined too narrowly – failing to capture the richness and diversity of non-formal and informal learning?



What's next?

- For the LO approach to be relevant to validations it must be written in a way which acknowledges the existence of different learning pathways and contexts.
- The writing of qualifications standards, education programmes and units must now be approached with this broadening in mind.
- The development of the learning outcomes approach suffers from the lack of a common platform and an active community of practise stimulating mutual learning and development. We need to compare practises – good and bad – to make progress.