



**CEDEFOP**

# Learning outcomes going global

A multifaceted phenomenon

**POLICY BRIEF**

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## **POLICY BACKGROUND**

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need to go global**

**National, European and  
international policy reform**

**Multiple purposes  
and users**





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Learning outcomes state what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand at the end of a learning process or sequence. The idea of learning outcomes increasingly seems to dominate education policy at European and international levels; many countries around the world seem to be shifting towards a greater role for learning outcomes in their education and qualification systems (Cedefop, 2008; 2009). Currently all countries from Europe and many beyond are actively using learning outcomes or competence <sup>(1)</sup> statements when defining, reviewing and refining the content and profile of their education, training and skills provisions and strategic practices (Cedefop, 2016; 2017; 2022; UNESCO, et al., 2023).

Major progress has been made in these areas over the past two decades, but a tendency to underestimate the variety of factors influencing the take-up and successful application of the approach is observed. For instance, asserting that the writing of a learning outcomes approach will, by default, trigger change may undermine its overall credibility. The interests and decisions taken by different stakeholders directly influence the way, and the extent to which, learning outcomes move from intentions to actual outcomes, especially for learners.



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<sup>(1)</sup> The focus on learning outcomes brings in the concept of competence, defined by Cedefop (2014) as the 'ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, training, work or professional development)'. Although the term competence is widely used throughout Europe, and in several countries replaces the term learning outcomes, there are many different definitions and interpretations that might be worth consideration.

# International dimension: need to go global

The shift to learning outcomes is considered one of the most significant trends to have influenced European VET over the past two decades. There has also been a major shift in the conceptual basis of qualifications and curricula in most countries in Europe and across the world: the move to define qualifications by learning outcomes. This move allows for a more systematic analysis and comparison of the content and profile of qualifications. It also facilitates dialogue between education and training and labour market actors, as well as across different education and training sub-systems. The increased transparency offered by learning outcomes acts as an important reference point for stakeholders including policy-makers, labour market actors and teachers, so making it easier to analyse the match between skills demands and education and training provisions.

The move towards learning outcomes is observed in countries outside Europe in different ways. Effort has been made by [ETF partner countries](#) to modernise their qualifications systems. In this context, the learning outcomes-based approach is at the centre of revision of qualifications and education standards; this is reported in the NQF (national qualifications framework) inventory country chap-

ters and earlier ETF publications, such as *Making better vocational qualifications* or *Key competence lighthouse: key-competence-driven reforms in Ukraine and Georgia*. The vocational qualifications system reforms in ETF partner countries present how the learning outcomes approach offers a new perspective on qualifications and underscores the instrumental role of international frameworks, particularly the European qualifications framework (EQF) (along with alignment through the Bologna process).

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...vocational qualifications **system reforms in ETF partner countries** present how the **learning outcomes approach** offers a **new perspective on qualifications**...

# National, European and international policy reform

At national and international level, learning outcomes underpin several policy developments. For example, learning outcomes inspire the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning (see the European case study and Madagascar case study below). All learning outcomes, irrespective of when and where they have been acquired, should in principle be made visible and appropriately valued. The rapid development and implementation of national and regional qualifications frameworks in the last decade demonstrates the reorientation towards outcomes and the ambitions associated with them. Qualification frameworks also support providers by facilitating cooperation across institutional and national borders and opening systems to a wider range of individual learning experiences (Pouliou & Garmash, 2023). Efforts are observed to link frameworks and quality assurance processes as well; learning outcomes descriptors of the frameworks provide a reference point for the levelling and profiling of programmes and qualifications.

However, the learning outcomes approach has been questioned and criticised by various researchers (Hussey & Smith, 2003, 2008, Allais, 2014). Although the terminology of learning outcomes is ambivalent (various terms are used, including competences,

learning aims or even learning objectives), its understanding is often limited. It is seen by some to manage regional and local practices centrally, strengthening the accountability of schools and teachers. In other cases, it is perceived as a way to focus on learners, providing teachers and students with tools for active and open learning. These choices point to different directions and illustrate the relationship between the learning outcomes approach and principles used in other policy areas.

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...**qualification frameworks** also **support providers by facilitating cooperation** across institutional and national borders...



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### Box 1. Policy aspirations of learning outcomes

The shift to learning outcomes:

- is the key to lifelong and life-wide learning;
- facilitates the valuing of all learning, including what has been acquired outside formal education and training;
- increases the transparency of qualifications for learners, education and training providers as well as employers;
- facilitates progress in an increasingly complex and diverse education and training landscape;
- strengthens the accountability of education and training by focusing on achieved learning outcomes rather than input factors and intentions;
- increases comparability of qualifications between countries and facilitates transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes across borders.

# Multiple purposes and users

## Swiss army knife or glue?

Learning outcomes are described as the ‘glue’ binding diverse policy initiatives and instruments together, and are seen as a precondition to achieving their aims. This growing influence of learning outcomes in European countries, and in (almost) all education and training sectors, reflects strong political consensus on the perceived usefulness of this approach (Cedefop, 2022).

Learning outcomes are suitable for a variety of purposes (Figure 1), just like a Swiss army knife; they influence initiatives at different levels and in a wide range of areas. These different purposes influence teaching and learning in both positive and negative ways, pointing to opportunities as well as challenges.

The purposes of learning outcomes influence the links and the collaboration between different stakeholders. They must be defined in a way that suits different users and their needs. They need to be fit-for-purpose and formulated in a way that supports flexibility in approaches to learning and qualifications, especially if lifelong learning is to be encouraged (Cedefop, 2022).

Learning outcomes approaches aim to keep the

learner at the centre, while also creating a common channel between education and training and the labour market; this prepares the learner for the world of work. In Figure 2, the learner at the centre of the circle represents a shift toward more learner-centred policies and pedagogies; the learning outcomes bridge the gap between the world of education and the labour market. The right-hand side includes stakeholders representing the labour market, the left those from education and training. According to Cedefop (2016), ‘the two sides come together to develop learning outcomes, level descriptors and occupational and educational standards – with the goal of improving learner preparation for work and further learning (a specific occupation, as well as the skills they will need to advance – professionally as well as to higher levels of education). Stakeholder and policy-maker involvement, economic and social policy and strategy development, programme implementation, quality assurance, review and evaluation are represented as a cycle encompassing the users and uses.’

Learning outcomes influence the description and definition of curricula, programmes and qualifications, but the impact of these statements on teaching, learning and assessment is less

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researched and more difficult to judge, especially due to the emergence of many on-line providers. The wider challenge lies in transforming learning outcomes intentions and statements into actual outcomes of learning; into knowledge, skills and competences acquired and used by individuals at work or in broader life contexts. [Cedefop's \(2023\) study \*The shift to learning outcomes; rhetoric or reality?\*](#) seeks to analyse this transformation, focusing on initial vocational education and training, in schools and apprenticeships.

Teachers must have a clear idea of what they want learners to be able to do at the end of a unit of study and communicate the intended learning outcomes, making the learning activity more learner centred. However, students tend to look at the assessment and structure their learning activities, as far as they are able, to optimise their assessment performance. Assessment, the intended learning outcomes, and the learning activities must all be aligned. If students are assessed against assessment criteria that do not match, they might lose motivation for learning. Conversely, well-aligned learning outcomes can be useful to the students in several ways, as demonstrated [in the example of Norway](#).



Figure 1. **Purposes of learning outcomes**

### QUALIFICATIONS

Learning outcomes play a crucial role in defining qualifications framework levels, enhancing transparency and enabling cross-country comparison. To avoid limiting autonomy and facilitate effective interaction with diverse users and systems, balancing specificity and generality is essential.

### ASSESSMENT

Assessment specifications detail criteria for evaluations, providing precise requirements for learners. These criteria, using learning outcomes statements, are often formulated as threshold levels which must be met by the candidate; they indicate how a learning experience is to be graded, indicating how learning can be achieved at different levels of complexity and proficiency. These requirements support summative assessments at the end of the learning process but can also orient formative assessments taking place throughout the learning process.

### CURRICULA

Curricula shape learning experiences and learning outcomes guide teaching by specifying expected knowledge and skills. Balancing detail in learning outcomes is crucial; it aids guidance but risks limiting local and individual adaptation.



### TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

Learning outcomes influence teaching methods, learning environments and assessment practices.



### QUALIFICATIONS STANDARDS

Learning outcomes shape qualification standards, specifying expected outcomes for full or partial qualifications. Often developed nationally, with input from stakeholders, these address a broad set of competences relevant to society and the labour market.



### OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

Occupational profiles, set by labour market stakeholders, strongly influence the definition of learning outcomes by signalling key employment skills.



### VALIDATION AND RECOGNITION

Learning outcomes can be used as a reference point for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, as the focus is on the type of learning to have been achieved, not on a particular time required. This can play an important role in employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning.



Figure 2. **Learning outcomes: users and uses**



**Stakeholders & policy-makers   Economic & social policy & strategy   Implementation   Quality assurance   Review & evaluation**



# EVIDENCE

## In this section

**Learning outcomes  
in qualifications  
design**

**European  
perspective**

**International  
perspective**

**Comparative  
lessons**





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The learning outcomes approach is generally accepted and adopted across Europe and beyond, though its application varies significantly. The impetus for a shift towards learning outcomes approaches, both in national systems and in different subsystems of education and training, has appeared at different times depending on the country and/or system characteristics. Systems that show more incremental features, like France or UK-Scotland, have been developing these approaches and policy instruments over a long period but in different ways. In other countries, such as Croatia and Romania, reforms have been stimulated by the EU accession process, among other drivers.

In some countries, developing learning outcomes approaches in vocational or higher education has direct links with the establishment of lifelong learning strategies and practices (e.g. Austria, Estonia, Iceland). In other cases, stakeholders are brought together to develop a comprehensive NQF and this has been a major factor in developing a lifelong learning strategy cutting across subsystems (Ireland, Malta, Austria). Adopting a learning outcomes approach, has also enhanced lifelong and life-wide learning and mobility (i.e. international mobility for study, traineeships and work) (e.g. Finland).



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# Learning outcomes in qualifications design

European NQFs inspired by the EQF are based on learning outcomes in defining what qualification holders should know, understand and be able to do. When learning outcomes are paired with elements like quality assurance, comparability and trust in qualifications is ensured. Framework level descriptors act as main reference points for designing qualifications and so increase consistency in programmes and qualifications with similar standards and requirements.

Cedefop NQF monitoring reports and studies (Cedefop, 2016; 2017) clearly show a strengthened use of learning outcomes and competence approaches in VET and higher education, with observed progress in general education in some countries. For instance, the Irish NQF has received positive feedback in a survey regarding improved practice in course and curricula design (Indecon, 2017). Other countries like Austria and Slovenia, demonstrate a consistency in qualifications regulations using learning outcomes in the description of qualification profiles. However, it is important to establish parity of esteem and equivalence between qualifications through a comprehensive and holistic approach to learning outcomes across education sectors.

While qualifications are increasingly described

in terms of learning outcomes, it is important that information on their content is clear and easily accessible to individuals such as learners and workers. Digital developments can potentially improve the way in which information on qualifications is made available, presented, and compared with their impact on transparency, trust, portability, and relevance (Azzarà & Garmash, 2023). In recent years, progress has been made in developing qualifications and registers databases which increasingly provide access to information on the learning outcomes of single qualifications; promotion of the interoperability of such databases across EU countries and beyond is observed <sup>(2)</sup>. Efforts have been made at EU level to address the challenge of varying learning outcomes presentation, hindering the comparability of qualifications and limiting the use of digital technologies. Building upon past and present developments in formats, models, and methods for presenting and sharing information on qualifications, as well as recent digital developments, common principles have been established for developing short descriptions of learning outcomes for publications on qualifications databases and registers <sup>(3)</sup>.

Selected European and international country cases illustrate below the links between learning outcomes and qualifications framework developments.

<sup>(2)</sup> Building on existing tools, ETF is working on connecting qualifications databases beyond the EU (see Azzara, & Garmash, 2023).

<sup>(3)</sup> The European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group and the Europass Advisory Group mandated a group of experts (2021-23) to develop guidelines on short descriptions of learning outcomes for publication on Europass. The European Guidelines for the development and writing of short, learning outcomes-based descriptions of qualifications have been endorsed by both groups in November 2023 and will soon be published on Cedefop and Europass web portals.

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# European perspective

## Case study: Norwegian student use of learning outcomes

The relevance of the learning outcomes approach is considered significant in Norway, emphasised through the widespread **knowledge promotion** (*Kunnskapsløftet*) reform implemented in 2006. Higher education institutions were requested to adopt learning outcomes in line with the **Norwegian qualifications framework (NKR)** descriptors in all study programmes by the end of 2012, and vocational college education (*fagskole*) by the end of 2014. The **Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)** engaged an expert panel to assess learning outcomes for accreditation in higher vocational education, which helped vocational colleges to develop and use learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are assessed as part of all accreditations and reaccreditations of study programmes (Cedefop, 2023).

The knowledge promotion reform was continued by recent **curriculum renewal** (*Fagfornyelsen*) fully implemented by the end of 2021. As a result, the learning outcomes have been rewritten to include more in-depth learning and better understanding (Cedefop, 2023). Both the 1994 VET reform and

the knowledge promotion reform, as well as the recent revision, affected the evolution of VET curricula. The newer curricula include more open learning outcomes that allow students to achieve at different levels and give practitioners autonomy in adapting teaching practice (Cedefop, 2022). The revision introduced core elements in all subjects, shared and specific learning outcomes across programmes, as well as a list of specific action verbs emphasising abilities.

According to NOKUT's **comprehensive review**, 90% of students in Norway are aware of learning outcomes and use these in their studies; such a high value may indicate that students are taking ownership of their learning. The more the students feel that the learning outcome descriptions (intended learning outcomes) align with what they have learned (achieved learning outcomes), the more they use them to prepare for their exams. It was found that this was the decisive factor determining use by students (NOKUT, 2023a; 2023b).

Many students are informed about learning outcomes: 43% became aware before they started their education, and 47% became aware after they were offered a place to study by receiving information during their educational journey (NOKUT, 2023a). Learning outcomes in this context act as a common language, allowing students to understand the expected outcomes of their education.

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**...every EU Member State has at least one skills anticipation method** in place and many benefit from **multiple methods...**



**...employment and skills forecasts remain the backbone of skills anticipation and intelligence** in most countries...

Figure 4. **Student evaluation of the quality of learning outcomes**

**Learning outcomes are easy to understand**



**Learning outcomes for the individual subjects are clearly linked to the learning outcomes for the entire programme**



**Learning outcomes correspond to what I have learned in the subject I have completed**



■ Disagree (1-2) ■ Neutral (3) ■ Agree (4-5)

Source: NOKUT (2023a, p.20)



# International perspective

## European Training Foundation (ETF)

ETF partner countries have engaged in reform of their qualifications systems, inspired by the European practices, and introduced national qualifications frameworks with the aim of improving the relevance and transparency of their qualifications. The pre-accession and accession countries (all Western Balkan economies, Türkiye, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) follow the European skills agenda directly and participate in the works of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG). The remaining partner countries collaborate with the EU in the education and training area in the framework of concluded Association Agreements or cooperation actions.

As reported in the [ETF country chapters](#) on NQFs, most of the ETF partner countries introduced the learning outcomes approach to describing individual qualifications and often stipulated their use as mandatory in the regulations on quality assurance in education. Such is the case in [Georgia](#), where accreditation standards require definition of learning outcomes and their alignment with the NQF level descriptors. In Serbia, 'ensuring a learning outcomes-based education system' is

one of the explicit goals of the [Serbian National Qualifications Framework](#).

In vocational education and training (VET) and in the professional qualifications systems, the pursuit of improved relevance and match of training provision with labour market needs is often realised through the use of occupational standards (seen in countries such as Ukraine, Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Türkiye). Development of and link to the respective occupational standards may be a mandatory requirement for inclusion of a new qualification into the register. Such an approach requires input from stakeholders in charge of developing occupational standards.

Adoption of the learning outcomes approach has taken place to varying degrees in general education; in higher education, partner countries participating in the Bologna process have aligned with the [European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA \(ESG\)](#) and assess the feasibility of the programmes' learning outcomes and their correspondence to the NQF levels during the accreditation process. The use of learning-outcomes based standards triggered a focus on describing learning that is achieved regardless

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**...ETF partner countries** have engaged in **reform of their qualifications systems**, inspired by the European practices, and **introduced national qualifications frameworks...**



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of the context and enabled the potential for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Most of the ETF partner countries have already introduced respective regulations on validation <sup>(4)</sup> but the learning outcomes confirmed through validation are not easily transferrable to the formal education system. While modernised standards technically enable modular training provision, training providers rarely offer flexible learning pathways. Preparing such an offer is a financial, organisational and pedagogical challenge (ETF, 2022, p.18).

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<sup>(4)</sup> The forthcoming ETF cross-country analysis report on validation of non-formal and informal covering sixteen ETF Partner Countries identified validation practices in most of them with data indicating practices on a medium to high scale in eight of them.

## Case study: Ukraine and the New Ukrainian School concept <sup>(5)</sup>

The 2016 New Ukrainian School (NUS) concept set the vision for 21st century education in Ukraine, following wide national debate. The NUS reform has extended the duration of compulsory education from 11 to 12 years. Learning outcomes are a central part of education and training reforms in Ukraine under the New Ukrainian school, which gives the highest priority to the development of competences, freedom of creativity of teaching staff, decentralised and effective governance to bring real autonomy to schools, pedagogies based on partnership between students, teachers and parents, as well as promoting the learner-centred approach in education. The use of learning outcomes was authorised in 2014 and 2017 through the laws on education and higher education which prescribe their mandatory use for each new qualification. The new standards apply an integrated learning outcomes approach to the development of key competences, using as a reference the [European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework](#), [European Digital Competence framework](#), as well as the [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) of the Council of Europe. These underpin the model curricula that schools can adopt or adapt in order to make their own curricula.

The 2017 [Law on Education](#) makes clear links between 11 Ukrainian key competences and the European key

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<sup>(5)</sup> This case study draws from the upcoming ETF Country Fiche: National Qualification Framework, Ukraine, 2023.

<sup>(6)</sup> These reform actions were inspired by the [Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning](#) and the implementation of NUS was further aligned with [The Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning](#).



# LEARNING OUTCOMES-BASED CURRICULA



standards was endorsed, evaluating the learning outcomes in each of the four domains: knowledge, skills, communication, and autonomy and responsibility.

In 2021 guidelines were issued on development of VET standards according to the competence-based approach. The [new model of standards for VET](#) require that learning outcomes describe key and professional competences derived from occupational standards. Labour functions (units of occupational standards) can be used as the basis for units of learning outcomes and modular curricula. Learning outcomes-based curricula are gradually introduced in the State standards. To date, 71 such State standards have been issued. The learning outcomes approach should allow for curricula in which training in schools is combined with authentic learning in the workplace. Education programmes contain compulsory and optional elements, so that learners can tailor them to suit their needs and interests better.

The [Law on Higher Education \(2014\)](#) links higher education qualifications to the NQF. The use of learning outcomes is mandatory for [education programmes to be accredited](#). The methodology for developing higher education standards describes the formulation and use of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes for higher education specialties are defined nationally and programme learning outcomes are defined by higher education institutions which publish them in their course catalogues. A project team is established for each programme, defining the ‘portrait’ of the future specialist with a list of competences, determining specific learning outcomes, selecting the best ways to provide students with opportunities to acquire these competences, and choosing the most effective forms of evaluation. The

diploma supplements describe the learning outcomes of individual qualifications.

## UNESCO

The [2015 UNESCO Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training \(TVET\)](#) recommends that Member States develop and implement ‘well-articulated outcome-based qualifications frameworks or systems based on learning outcomes’ ([UNESCO, 2016](#)). A learning outcomes approach is seen as way to strengthen the transparency of qualifications systems, and as a basis for facilitating flexible learning pathways and the recognition of prior learning. This is particularly important in the context of many countries around the world with a significant number of low-skilled or unskilled individuals who wish to gain certification to access further learning and decent work.

In the second monitoring exercise of the 2015 Recommendation carried out in 2022-23, three quarters of reporting States reported reforms in their qualifications systems over the last four-year period (UNESCO, forthcoming). The most common type of reform related to the establishment of a national qualifications system (55% of responses), followed by the establishment of a system for the recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning (49%). Although responses may not have explicitly mentioned learning outcomes, both types of reform often require the adoption of a learning outcomes approach, as seen earlier. States were also invited to report on practical measures adopted to help TVET graduates progress into further and higher education programmes. Measures adopted for this purpose included the use of NQF to facilitate transitions (64%), the development of RPL (recognition of prior learning)

# LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACH

systems (60%) and the support of credit recognition agreements based on learning outcomes (38%).

The case study below highlights some of the ways a learning outcomes approach has influenced recent education and training reforms in countries.

### Case study: Madagascar

In 2015, Madagascar adopted a National policy for employment and vocational training (*Politique Nationale de l'Emploi et de la Formation Professionnelle, PNEFP*). This aimed to improve employability and human resources by making the TVET system more responsive to the needs of the labour market. Development of a modern, flexible certification and training system was a

central recommendation of the policy; a competence-based approach was adopted to support it.

The policy provided for the development of a National Qualifications Framework, backed by a robust quality assurance system, that included mechanisms for the acquisition and recognition of skills. This was particularly relevant given that many young people and older adults acquired their skills and competences outside of the formal TVET system. A focus on competences and learning outcomes would enable them to have their skills recognised and certified.

The new Madagascar NQF consists of ten levels of qualifications, defined in terms of learning outcomes, independent of the occupational sector, and across the following domains: knowledge, know-how, cognitive ability, communication and information, and autonomy and responsibility. The NQF introduces the concept of 'competence blocs' as a way of structuring qualifications. This allows for learning and experiences to be combined or 'stacked' throughout life. The process of structuring skills and knowledge into blocks is also essential for the implementation of the system of recognition of prior learning (RPL); the system was enshrined in law in 2018 and will be scaled up nationwide following its piloting in 2021.

The example of Madagascar highlights how learning outcomes have had a significant impact on the country's education and training, without specific policy reform focusing explicitly on them. The approach has influenced the development and restructuring of key elements of the TVET system, such as the NQF and RPL system, both of which require learning outcomes as their underlying building blocks.



# Comparative lessons



The indicative examples selected from Europe and beyond show that qualifications at different levels and parts of education and training are described using learning outcomes. National and regional qualifications frameworks provide a reference point for defining and writing learning outcomes. In this context, the role of level descriptors based on learning outcomes is to identify the ‘centre of gravity’ of a programme or qualification, based on intended and expected knowledge, skills and competences and not force all statements to comply with one particular NQF level ([see case study on Madagascar](#)).

The examples also show a broad political agreement among stakeholders on the need for, and usefulness of, learning outcomes. The shift to this approach is perceived as a way to interact in a different manner with labour market stakeholders and to improve the quality of the programmes and qualifications on offer. Learning outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are key instruments facilitating reform and governance: Ukraine and Madagascar show how learning outcomes have influenced recent education and training reforms.

The Norwegian case study illustrates teacher and student awareness of learning outcomes, with the learner an essential element in reforming education and training. The aspiration of the approach in reforming pedagogics is mainly centred on the fact that it is possible for the learner to better understand the learning process and the expectations involved. Applying learning outcomes is seen to balance the relationship between teachers and learners and allow for a more active involvement of the latter. Closely connected to this learner-centeredness, active learning, flexible learning, problem-based learning and self-directed learning are assumed to follow from a shift to learning outcomes. In this context, the teacher acts as a facilitator and an enabler of learning, rather than directing and instructing (ETF, 2020). Nevertheless, learning outcomes are sometimes implemented in ‘silos’ (frameworks, standards, curricula, assessment specifications, not communicating with each other) and such lack of alignment can reduce their overall impact on pedagogies and educational reform. For this reason, illustrative case studies like these can shed light on the complex reality in which learning outcomes operate.

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...Ukraine and Madagascar show **how learning outcomes** have **influenced recent education and training reforms...**



...the **Norwegian case study** illustrates teacher and student awareness of learning outcomes, with the **learner** an **essential element in reforming education and training...**



# CONCLUSIONS



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yourself



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The concept of learning outcomes is becoming a common basis for almost all **national** and **regional qualifications frameworks** worldwide. However, only in recent years can we see the emergence of empirical evidence that tries to identify in a systematic manner the strengths and limitations of the approach. Cedefop studies in 2009, 2016 and 2023 provide an overview of the implementation of the approach in different areas and systems of education (general, vocational, higher education).

Change has also taken place in higher education, during the last decade. European cooperation on qualifications frameworks and quality assurance has contributed to this shift but there are observable differences between disciplines and institutions.

General education has witnessed revision of national and core curricula and increased focus on key competences and international assessments (PISA). The **European Commission's framework of key competences for lifelong learning** promotes an active role for all citizens in gradual, self-guided development of learning outcomes for eight key European competences essential throughout life transitions, self-realisation in all spheres of life. Specific EU competence frameworks – **EntreComp**, **DigComp**, **LifeComp** and **GreenComp** – have

been developed as reference tools for both policy makers and curricula and assessment designers. They define key competences as a dynamic combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes and are cross-referenced through several transversal skills common for all these frameworks. While progression between levels of key competences throughout all parts of individual lifelong learning is very much linked to personal goal setting and the pace of learning, frameworks of key competences could be used to improve the quality and complexity of learning outcome definition in formal education.

Experienced curriculum designers can see correspondence between **ISCED** (International standard classification of education) levels in formal schooling and levels of progression of key competence frameworks. However, both ISCED and competence frameworks, and also qualifications frameworks, follow different objectives and should be used selectively, according to their specificity. Integration of learning outcomes into education curricula requires specific tools and guidelines; the ETF has aimed to support this objective and help teachers in making an easier shift from factual knowledge-based teaching and learning based on memorisation to the approach of putting the learner



**...Cedefop studies** provide an overview of the **implementation** of the approach in **different areas and systems of education...**



**...general education** has witnessed **revision of national and core curricula** and increased **focus on key competences** and **international assessment...**



**...curriculum designers** can see **correspondence between ISCED levels** in formal schooling and **levels of progression of key competence frameworks...**



into the driver's seat. This approach requires a learning environment conducive to experiential, active learning. Progression across the levels of key competences is based on the gradual improvement and the increasing complexity and autonomy of learning outcomes developed during an individual's lifespan, across various forms and phases of formal education, nonformal learning, adult upskilling and reskilling. An example of an innovative tool launched [jointly by the ETF and the JRC is the Scaffold deck of cards for teachers](#) designing cross-curricula, complex learning experiences based on an integrated learning outcomes' approach.

However, it remains to be seen whether these developments can have an actual impact on teaching, learning processes and learner mobility within European countries and beyond. The selection of teaching methodologies and techniques, especially the use of digital technologies, has implications for learners and the design of education and training programmes. Stakeholders should be involved in development and review so that **learning outcomes are a 'living thing'**.

Another question is whether systemic reforms have been enabled. While developments in validation arrangements and comprehensive qualification frameworks suggest the aspirations of learning outcomes and lifelong learning have been addressed, research remains limited. Cedefop is carrying out studies supporting policy developments at EU, national and sectoral levels; its study on European and national policy initiatives promoting [transparency and transferability of learning outcomes](#) of the past two decades (2000-20) attempts to examine how they have supported individual citizens' lifelong and life-wide learning. Learning outcomes acquired outside formal education and training institutions are still less visible

and not fully trusted and valued.

The policy impact of learning outcomes makes it increasingly important to focus on strengths and challenges as well as policy implications.

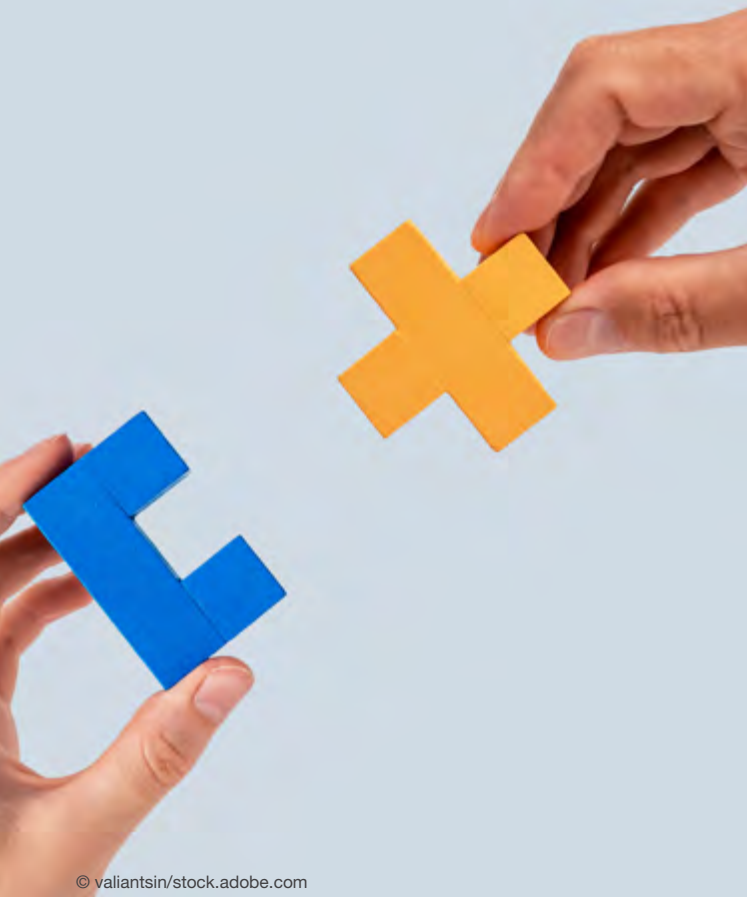
### Box 2. Learning outcomes in VET

In vocational education and training, the learning outcomes principle is a forerunner. It has become a more explicit and visible building block:

-  a way to increase **transparency of VET**
-  a way to broaden **access to VET**
-  a way to improve **relevance of VET**
-  a way to put the learner **at the centre of the process**



Source: Authors.



### Box 3. Strengths of learning outcomes

- Learning outcomes can act as a common language, providing a comprehensive map of national qualifications and relationships between them.
- Learning outcomes can act as a facilitator of learner mobility through recognition of credentials.
- Learning outcomes are instrumental in defining and communicating skills (including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning) facilitating their use by individuals (empowering learners) or employers and enabling further development by individuals and training institutions.
- The learning outcomes approach clarifies the intention of the teaching and learning process.
- The learning outcomes approach clarifies what is expected from the learner in terms of knowledge, skills and overall competences.
- The learning outcomes approach facilitates, through consistent alignment of teaching, learning and assessment, better design of education and training programmes.
- The increased transparency and clarity of the learning outcomes approach supports a more learner-centred process, potentially opening up to active, self-directed and problem-based learning.

### Box 4. Areas for further reflections on learning outcomes

- Challenges related to defining and writing learning outcomes can be observed.
- While learning outcomes statements are written for different purposes, relationships should be sought between the learning outcomes written for qualifications frameworks, qualifications standards, programme curricula and assessment specifications.
- Accessibility of learning outcomes; for the purpose of comparison, their depth (levels and complexity) and breadth (knowledge, skills and/or competences) must be known and understood by all stakeholders, but comparability is still hard to achieve.
- Link between learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning; a result of negotiations and compromises between stakeholders. While learning outcomes can be viewed as a condition for successful implementation of validation, the application of the approach still requires careful reflection. If written too narrowly, important facets of the individual learning experience may be lost; if written too generally, validation may lose orientation, consistency and reliability.
- The effort of countries to redefine qualifications based on learning outcomes exceeds the capacities (financial, human) of national administrations and sectoral bodies; progress is generally rather slow.
- It is still not clear whether the content and profile of a credential or certificate can be presented in terms of learning outcomes.





### Box 5. Policy implications/messages

- The shift to learning outcomes is not an isolated but a multifaceted phenomenon; it is closely linked to broader policies and traditions in both private and public education.
- Learning outcomes are used in different ways, so there is a need to identify the strengths as well as weaknesses of the approach linked to the specific context in which they are used.
- Learning outcomes are used for many purposes, so alignment between these purpose needs to be addressed. It is important to ensure that applications of the approach developed for different purposes (i.e. design of level descriptors of qualifications, curricula, assessment) speak to and strengthen each other.
- In VET, learning outcomes are perceived as a means to strengthen not only the systematic dialogue between stakeholders inside and outside schools, but also the relevance and quality of the programmes and qualifications on offer.
- Learning outcomes approach is a balancing act, between narrow and wide intentions. The way learning outcome statements are written matters; it influences the balancing of general subjects, occupational skills and transversal skills and competence. For this reason, it is important to strike the balance between predictability/prescription and specificity and generality.
- Writing learning outcomes requires systematic reflection on the use of labour market intelligence and careful balancing between needs of other users. By some it can be seen as a bureaucratic obligation or as a way to strengthen the accountability of schools and teachers, by others as a pedagogical reform tool and a way to promote active and open learning.
- Common terminology, based on learning outcomes is needed to facilitate mutual understanding among stakeholders. Learning outcomes provide a common language allowing different stakeholders in education and training, as well as the labour market and society at large, to clarify skills needs and to respond to these in a relevant way.
- Learning outcomes can support research, dialogue and learning within countries at EU and international levels. More than before, there is a need to provide practical guidance based on mutual learning and systematic research.

SHIFT TO  
**LEARNING  
OUTCOMES**

**A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON**

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## POLICY BRIEF

# Learning outcomes going global

## A multifaceted phenomenon

Learning outcomes are a multifaceted phenomenon, expanding across systems and borders. Countries around the globe employ learning outcomes when defining, reviewing, and refining the content and profile of their education, training and skills provisions and strategic practices. This policy brief discusses developments in using the learning outcomes approach and the links with qualification frameworks. It builds on Cedefop, ETF and UNESCO research on the topic.

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