



**CEDEFOP**

European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training

# **The writing of learning outcomes – main challenges and opportunities**

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## The 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.*



## The use of learning outcomes

Cedefop's **2009** publication on learning outcomes showed

- a geographical difference.
- an institutional difference.

Cedefop's **2013-14** (ongoing) study demonstrates that the shift to learning outcomes is now gaining speed.

- National qualifications frameworks
- For qualifications standards
- For curricula and to orient teaching and training
- For assessment





## Learning 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 and ESCO.....
- While the specific term may not have been used, **learning outcomes are not new**. What is new, however, is the high priority given to learning outcomes at European, national and local level.



## **Expectations at policy level**

- Transparency
- Increased relevance and quality of qualifications
- Accountability
- Seen as a way to open up to non-formal and informal learning

## **Expectations at the level of practitioners**

- Sets clear targets for the learner
- Motivates to learning
- Encourages flexible learning pathways
- Guiding teachers and trainers
- Orientation to assessors



## Concerns at policy level

- ✓ Are Learning outcomes a policy hype?
- ✓ Are LO monitored and reviewed?
- ✓ Are LOs a way to impose objectives top down, reducing local and institutional autonomy?
- ✓ Do we impose unnecessary 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?
- ✓ Do we decrease rather than increase transparency



## **Cedefop study 2014 – on the writing and practical application of learning outcomes**

- Carried out in cooperation with 3S, Vienna
- An analysis of learning outcomes based VET standards and Higher Education study programmes in 10 countries
- An analysis of guidelines for writing learning outcomes in VET and HE in the 10 countries
- Which are the main challenges, which are the main problems?
- How can we improve?

## Cedefop study 2014 – findings

- The definition of learning outcomes varies between institutions, education and training sectors and countries
- The approach to learning outcomes in VET seems to be more harmonized than in HE
- The structuring of learning outcomes descriptions vary, both as regards
  - the horizontal description of domains of learning and as regards
  - the vertical dimension, expressing the increasing complexity of learning.
- No common format for describing learning outcomes exists reducing comparability
- The level of detail (granularity) varies dramatically, reducing transparency and comparability



## Writing learning outcomes – fit for purpose

The purpose of the LO description will influence the level of detail (granularity) of the description, moving from the general to the more specific

- Full qualifications/programmes
- Programme or qualification units
- Assessment criteria

All have to use ACTION VERBS, identify the relevant OBJECT and describe the CONTEXT of the learning process.



## Writing learning outcomes – the key dimensions

The horizontal dimension of LO descriptions is crucial. The way we define and describe learning domains is crucial. In many cases these dimensions are not explicit in standards and programme descriptions

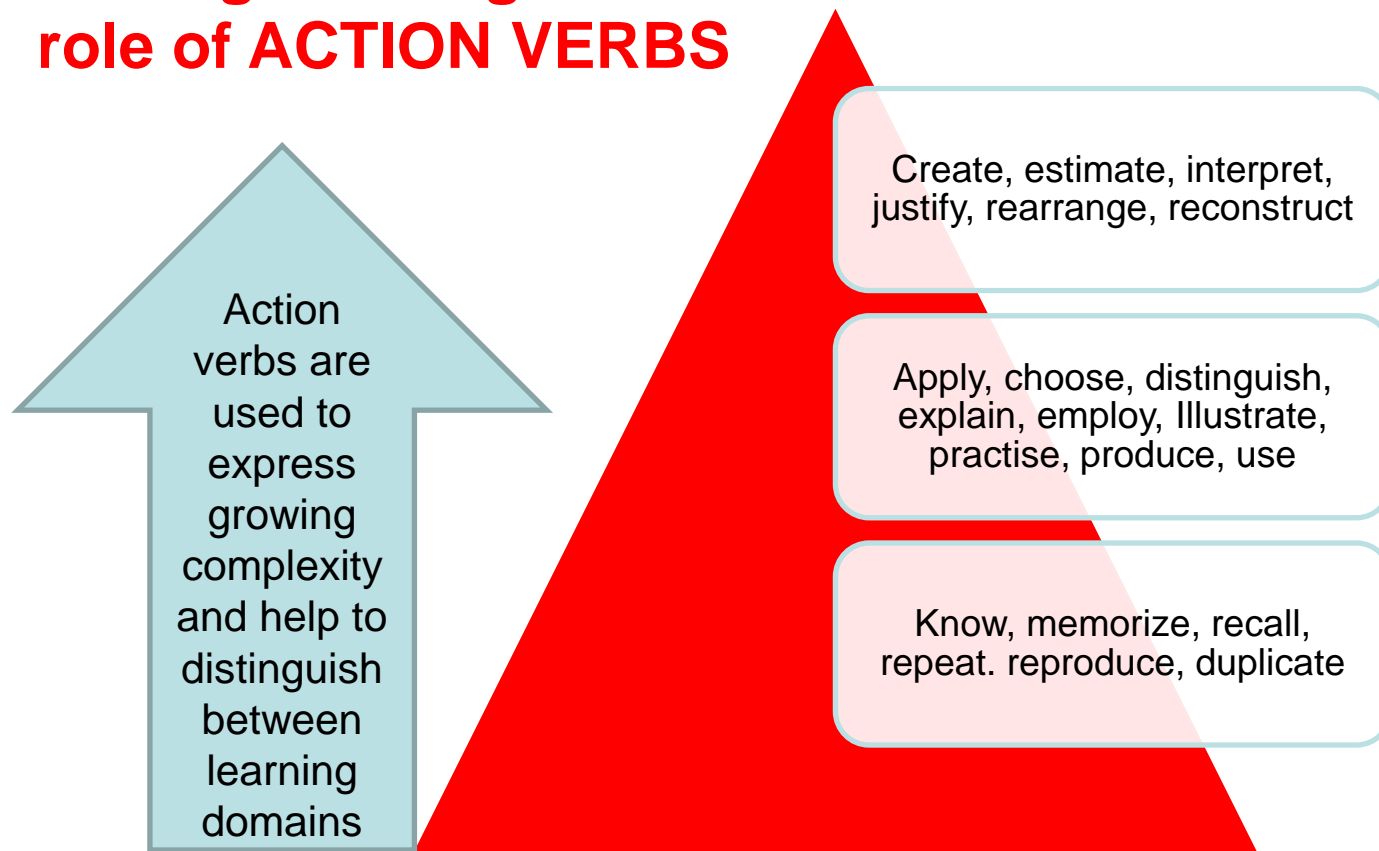
- How do we understand the different domains of learning
- How do we balance between learning domains, between theory and practise, knowledge and skills.....

The vertical dimension of LO is crucial,

- How do we express the complexity of learning?
- How do we see progression in a learning domain?
- How can research support articulation of progression?



## Writing learning outcomes – the essential role of ACTION VERBS





## 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.
- Cedefop will set up a Learning outcomes platform in 2015, providing examples of learning outcomes descriptions/applications used across Europe