



## Reflections and statements on learning outcomes: the need for clarification

### EUNEC conference Madrid, 16-18 June 2008

#### **1 The EUNEC conference on learning outcomes**

##### **1.1 EUNEC**

EUNEC is a network of education councils in the European Union. As a network, EUNEC brings together the expertise of advisory bodies and of the stakeholders and experts who are involved in the national / regional advisory processes. These advisory bodies give advice to the governments of the different European countries in the field of education and training.

EUNEC considers the discussion on learning outcomes as part of an ongoing interrogation and dialogue on the necessity of transparency of qualifications. We refer to the reflections on the European credit transfer system for vocational education and training and to EUNEC's elements of reflection on the Commission Staff Working Document, "Towards a European Qualifications framework (EQF) for lifelong learning".

##### **1.2 What are these statements and reflections meant for?**

EUNEC discussed the findings of European and national projects focussing in learning outcomes. The education councils gathered in Madrid formulated critical remarks and statements on these issues.

EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively towards the European Commission, the European Parliament, relevant DGs and CEDEFOP.

EUNEC also wants to promote action by EUNEC's members at national/regional level. These critical remarks and statements offer an input for national advisory opinions of education councils. They should provide a significant input for reflection and action by relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training such as providers of education, teacher trade unions, social partners (both intersectoral and branch organisations), experts in the field of education and training.

### **1.3 The conference on learning outcomes**

EUNEC organised the conference on learning outcomes on the 16th – 18th June 2008 together with the *Consejo Escolar del Estado* (CEE). 17 countries were represented, in most cases by their council, some by interested persons of national ministries. The presence and the contribution of Mrs. Mercedes Calvo-Sotelo, minister of Education, have emphasised the importance of this event.

The preliminary work and reflections of the councils of the autonomous regions of Spain and the *Consejo Escolar del Estado* on key competences contributed to a great extent to the success of the conference. This work came to an end on a conference in Bilbao in May 2008, attended by Tapio Saavala of the European Commission (DG EAC) and Simone Barthel, EUNEC president.

## **2 Reflections**

### **2.1 Learning outcomes: a confusing global concept but a useful tool**

The concept of “learning outcomes” is emerging both in the education and training policies of European countries as in the policy documents of the European Union. At the European level we refer to the Bologna process, the Copenhagen process and the programme “Education and Training 2010”. There are different European policy documents using the concept of learning outcomes such as the recommendation on EQF, key competences, the proposal on ECVET. The London communiqué introduced the concept within the Bologna process.

Instead of focusing on input factors like the duration, location and particular pedagogical method underpinning a qualification, the focus is directed towards what a learner knows and is able to do at the end of a learning process. These outcome based designs of education could stimulate active learning and learner based approaches.

The participants taking part in the EUNEC conference insisted on the fact that the concept of “learning outcomes” remains vague in certain respects, certainly if seen in the context of global shifts and innovation strategies. While the term learning outcomes can have a clear definition in the English language, this is not the case in numerous of the different European language traditions. This means that, unless an English language concept is to dominate the European discussions, the concept of learning outcomes is at best a developing concept rather than a clear and precise one. It follows, therefore, that the concept of learning outcomes in relationship with other similar concepts is also not clear, and can in practice cause confusion. Does the concept of learning outcomes encompass the concepts of competences, competencies, key competences, skills, objectives, goals, credits, capabilities, standards? ... What are the similarities and differences between all these terms? What are the relationships between them? Does the concept of learning outcomes entail necessarily a global change in pedagogic strategies and approaches in the compulsory education and certainly in the education and training for adult learners?

An analysis based on policy documents shows that the concept of learning outcomes is an evolving one. Therefore the concept of learning outcomes is the object of an ongoing debate and discussion. If it is necessary to have a common understanding of learning

outcomes, we also have to take into account that the application varies depending on context and focus (VET, training, higher education, key competences ...), as well as national language and cultural traditions.

## **2.2 The rationale behind learning outcomes**

The formulation of learning outcomes fulfils the following functions:

- Enhancing transparency, valorisation and efficiency of qualifications in relationship to lifelong learning. Formulating learning outcomes in education and training should realise a better interconnectivity between learning pathways and stimulate mobility between and within education systems. In this sense it is an important lever for lifelong learning. Learning outcomes raise the visibility and the validation of learning in formal, non-formal and informal learning. This whole approach is especially important for vulnerable groups in society and at the labour market, such as early school leavers and other learners with "dead ends" in their educational trajectory.
- Secondly learning outcomes should raise the social relevance of learning. Learning outcomes offer a platform for dialogue between the expectations of society and of the labour market and education and training. The work done by the *Consejo Escolar del Estado* and the *Consejos Escolares Autonómicos* on key competences is a clear example of such a dialogue.

In themselves learning outcomes are a tool and not a global concept for renewal in education. But the use of learning outcomes within a more global policy and strategies can lead to new learning approaches: more student centred and more active.

## **2.3 Learning outcomes should be embedded within a wider policy and strategy**

Elements of this policy are:

- A balanced design between social, political and pedagogic objectives:
  - Learning outcomes should not be formulated at a very detailed and accurate level so that the learning outcomes have no consistency and are quickly outdated. In this perspective learning outcomes should not be the result of a strictly behaviourist approach. On the other hand they should not be too generic and abstract so that they fail to describe the core objectives of a training or learning programme.
  - It is crucial that every country / region should formulate its own policy towards the use of learning outcomes, honouring the national culture, tradition and language (no policy borrowing).
  - The learning outcomes should at no moment be confused with guidelines for the organisation of the learning process or the didactic approach of the school and the school teams. The latter aspects belong these days to the autonomy of teachers and schools.
- Learning outcomes cannot describe every aspect of an education project (cross curricular activities, the hidden curriculum, values...). Learning outcomes have an added value if it is clear what they can describe and what they cannot. Learning outcomes should be part of a global school policy but they cannot deal with all

important aspects of a school policy such as the well being of pupils, school climate, equity....

- There is a real danger that learning outcomes only remain a feature of a merely bureaucratic operation. The design and use of learning outcomes have to impact on the learning process of the learners. Therefore the use of learning outcomes should become an element in a wider reform in each country / region. Besides the design, teaching processes should more adequately deal with diversity in learning styles and speed, using better procedures of differentiation. Rethinking assessment procedures to make them fit better for the purpose is absolutely necessary.
- The use of learning outcomes demands for stronger policy making capacities of schools. This is also related to strong and transparent systems of quality assurance and accountability. More school autonomy and devolution of policy decisions from the central level to a more decentralised approach will strengthen this process.
- The use of learning outcomes calls for a better and stronger valorisation of the role of teachers and school teams. The innovation should be built on a sense of ownership of teachers and school teams. The reform should recognize the professional status and autonomy of teachers. Decision makers are urged to make lifelong learning for teachers a reality. This is about ensuring a more coherent pathway between initial training and in service training and will require investments into these provisions. The next EUNEC conference will deal with this theme of professionalisation of teachers and trainers.

### **3 Statements**

EUNEC urges the European partners and experts to further develop European tools to enhance transparency and mobility (between countries, between working life and education and training, between education and training and within different levels of the education system).

But the concept of learning outcomes should be clear. It should also be understood within national contexts, educational contexts, sectors... Without a clear common understanding of learning outcomes as they appear in promising European tools, it will be impossible to implement these tools at a national/regional level. As indicated at the beginning of this advice, during the conference it was clear that participants used a different understanding of what learning outcomes mean. The translation of the term as such could have unwanted effects for the operationalisation at national level.

There is certainly a need for a communication strategy/terms that have a local context and meaning on the coherence of learning outcomes as part of a more encompassing EC policy (EQF, ECVET...). EUNEC proposes the EC and Cedefop to work on a better dissemination of good policy practices that can enrich the policy making and use of learning outcomes in other Member States.

Education councils offer a sound platform for consensus-building and dissemination. Referring to the EUNEC statements on educational reform, EUNEC is convinced that every innovation (and certainly a radical change with far reaching impact such as the use of learning outcomes) needs a negotiating platform with stakeholders. There is a need for an interface between evidence based models, stakeholders' approaches and policy

models – consensus building agreements (role for education councils). The conclusions of the EUNEC conference on learning outcomes show clearly that dialogue with stakeholders on central concepts of a renewal are really a necessity for a successful design and implementation.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Learning outcomes are an instrument for a change towards an outcomes-based approach to planning and implementing education reform at different levels, but not a new paradigm on their own.

It is clear that further work has to be done on the clarification of the concept. This is less a question of the usage in the English language, which the Cedefop study has helped to clarify, but rather for different language traditions that work in EU member states.

Teachers are a crucial factor of the change in approach. Professionalisation and lifelong learning for teachers is an important policy theme for the years to come.