



The use of learning outcomes approach in Europe

Rethinking assessment – 29 and 30 January 2024, Dublin, Ireland

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Shaping VET and qualifications

Cedefop

- actively supports the development and use of **European tools and principles** for transparency
- monitors **VET policy developments** across the EU
- Looks into the **future of VET**



Cedefop research and evidence



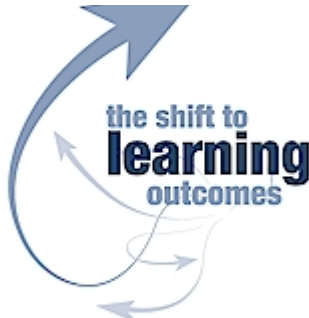
Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes

A EUROPEAN HANDBOOK – SECOND EDITION



Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

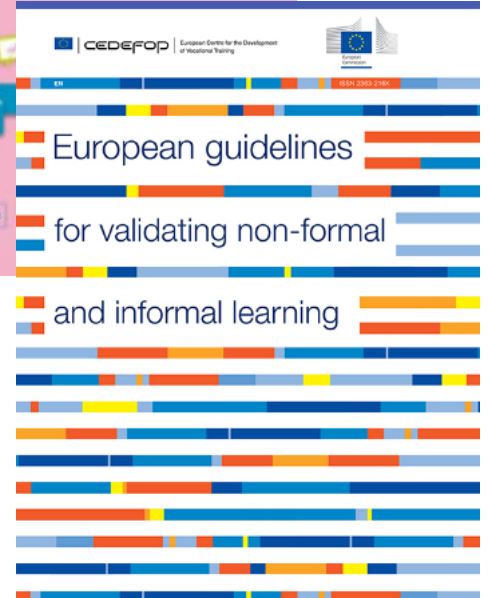


POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN EUROPE



THE SHIFT TO LEARNING OUTCOMES

Conceptual, and practice



<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/themes/learning-outcomes>



What are learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes: statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do *at the end of a learning process*



Formal, non-formal or informal learning

Formal learning

Organised and structured setting
Specifically dedicated to learning
(general education, initial VET, HE)

Non-formal learning

Planned activities with some form
of learning support
(in-company training, online
learning, civil society)

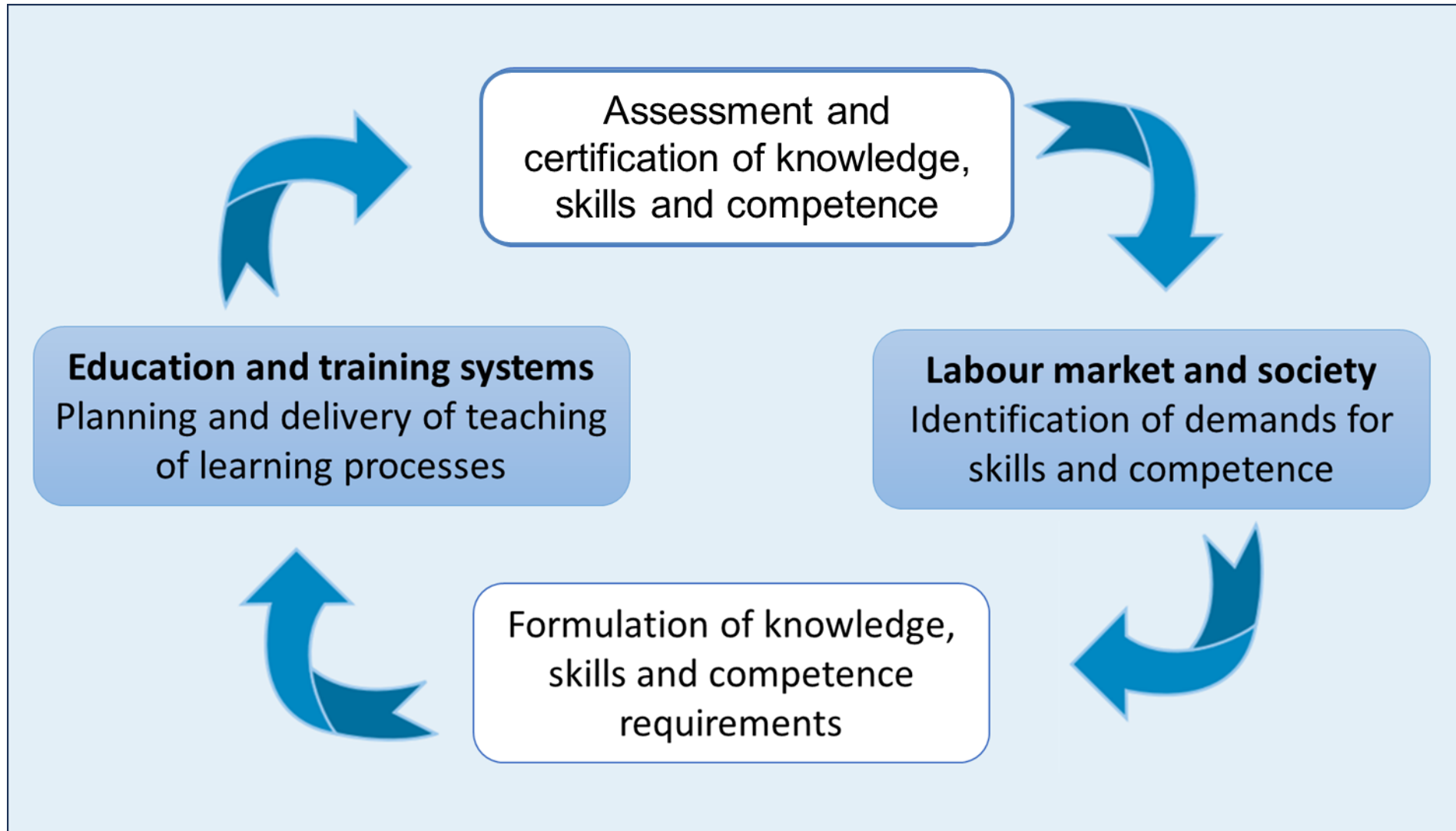
Informal learning

Not organised or structured
(daily activities related to
work, leisure, etc)

Promotion and use of LO in European policies and practices

- Explicitly **promoted in EU policy agenda** since the early 2000s (some national initiatives date further back)
- The approach is **present** in all countries and is **gaining speed**
- The “**glue**” binding together a range of initiatives and tools at an EU and national level
- The European Qualifications Framework (2008 and 2017) and the development of National qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes → **pushing factor**
- Considered instrumental for promoting **lifelong learning** and links between **education and training** and the **labour market**.

The feedback loop education-training and labour market-society



Source: Cedefop 2013 adapted

Purposes and applications of learning outcomes

Qualifications frameworks

Qualifications standards

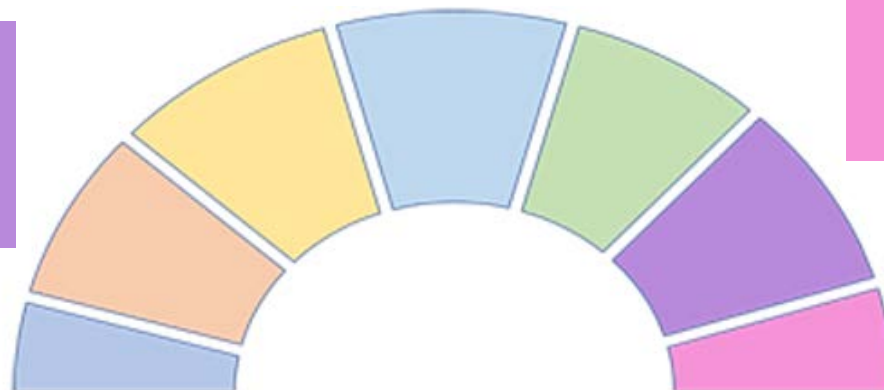
Curricula

Occupational standards

Assessment

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Teaching and learning practices



Learning outcomes need to be “**fit for purpose**” and **adapt** to the context while ensuring **alignment** between different applications

Alignment between applications

Development and application of learning outcomes for different purposes **must be combined with alignment**



Application of learning outcomes in different contexts need to speak to and strengthen each other.



Communication between the different instruments

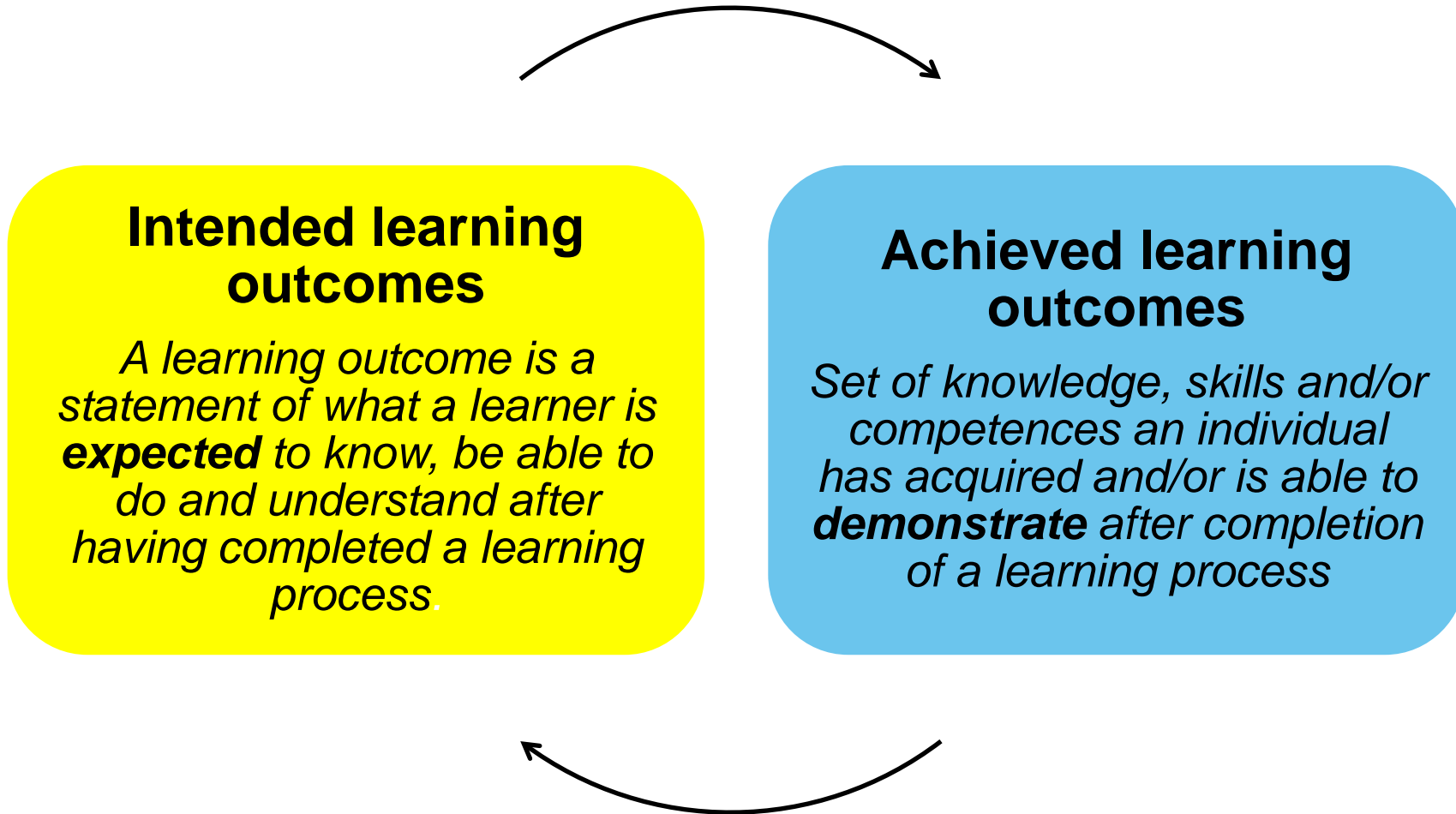


Biggs and Tang (2007) → alignment between **statements of learning outcomes**, the **teaching/learning activity** and the **assessment processes**, is critically important.

This interaction decides whether learning outcomes add value to the learning process or not and influences our ability to **move from statements of intended learning outcomes to (actual) achieved outcomes**.

The writing and articulation of learning outcomes must be followed by **implementation in practice**, through **teaching, learning and assessment** for learning outcomes to add value

Intended and achieved learning outcomes



Qualifications frameworks

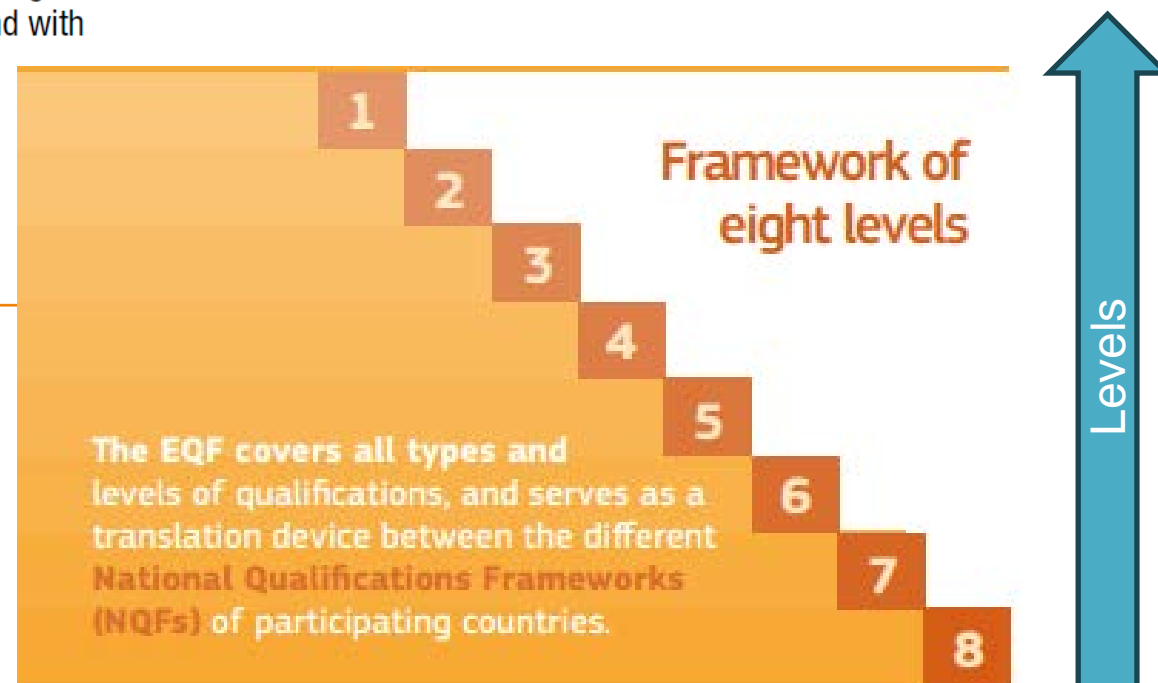
Qualification frameworks

- Main **objectives**: transparency and comparability of qualifications within and across borders; supporting lifelong learning (permeability and flexibility of E&T systems); strengthening quality and relevance of qualifications and qualification systems
- All NQFs use **learning-outcomes based level descriptors**
 - Reference point for the description and review and renewal of qualifications
- NQF **descriptors** are typically written at **high level of generality** → to be relevant for a wide variety of qualification types

EQF learning outcomes-based level descriptors: two dimensions

Learning domains

Knowledge	Skills	Responsibility and autonomy
<p>In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• theoretical and/or• factual	<p>In the context of EQF, skills are described as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking)• practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)	<p>In the context of the EQF, responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility.</p>



Qualifications

Qualifications

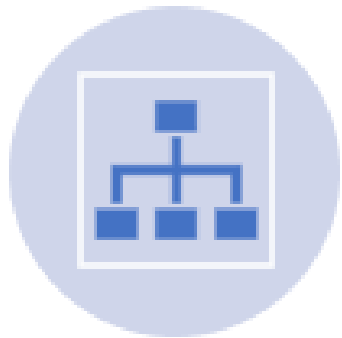
Qualification: *“formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards”*

- They might be divided into **modules or units** with separate and specific learning outcomes statements
- Qualifications increasingly **written in terms of learning outcomes**
- Tension between **broad** or **narrow** descriptions and functions
 - The way learning outcomes are written influences the balancing of **general subjects, occupational skills** and **transversal skills and competence**

Recent EU-level developments on descriptions of qualifications

Building on previous work on learning outcomes, the **European qualifications framework advisory group** and the **Europass advisory group** to the Commission have recently embedded:

European guidelines for the short descriptions of learning-outcomes based qualifications for publication on qualifications databases and registers



Scope: for all types and levels of qualifications (including units of qualifications)



Objective: increasing accessibility, transparency and comparability of qualifications; leverage digital developments; improve access to information for users

Main elements: Principles on “formal” and “content” aspects



A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a white lab coat, is smiling and looking upwards while holding a ball-and-stick molecular model. The model consists of black, white, and red spheres connected by sticks, representing a complex organic molecule. The background is a blurred laboratory or classroom setting with shelves and equipment.

Curricula

Curricula

- Learning outcomes **increasingly influence the design (and understating) of curricula**
 - Gradual shift from “teaching curricula” to “learning curricula” (attention to outcomes rather than inputs)
- The shift to learning outcomes frequently implies that **teaching methods** should **not be predefined** but be chosen with reference to expected outcomes and the context in which these are to be realise
- The way learning outcomes are written influences the **balancing** of general subjects, occupational skills and transversal skills and competence

Comparison of national VET curricula

- ❖ The comparison of **German, the Norwegian and Greek** (2013) → potential implications
- ✓ The expectations towards the German and Norwegian learners are indicated by verbs like **read, reflect, make work, explain** and **use** – underlining the need to be able to work independently and take responsibility
- ✓ The expectations towards the Greek (2013) auto mechanic is indicated by the ability to **describe knowledge** focussing on the ability to recall and reproduce taught content

CHAPTER 4

National curricula: dilemmas and opportunities

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate and analyse in more detail the dilemmas and opportunities involved in defining and describing learning outcomes for national curricula. Using examples from vocational education and training in Germany, Greece and Norway, the chapter points to similarities as well as differences in the application of learning outcomes at this level. The lessons from this comparative exercise will eventually inform the 'rules of thumb' provided in the final part (IV) of this handbook. All the three cases cover EQF/NQF level 4 qualifications, addressing retail, e-commerce, automobile mechanics and construction. While the German and Greek cases address the national VET curricula in general, the Norwegian case illustrates the way the subject of mathematics has been integrated into overall VET programmes.

4.1. German framework (national) curricula for retail and e-commerce

In Germany, federal framework curricula (*Rahmenlehrpläne*) orient the content and profile of VET programmes⁽¹⁵⁾. A German framework curriculum is based on the following elements:

- a general part describing the mandate and goals of vocational education and training, notably explaining the concept of *Handlungskompetenz* (competence to act);
- a listing of the different general learning fields and specialisations within the programme⁽¹⁶⁾;
- a detailed description of the different learning fields and the expectations of learners.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Resolution of the Conference of Ministers for Education of 12 March 2015 on the [Framework Agreement on Vocational Schools](#) (version of 9.9.2021).

⁽¹⁶⁾ This can differ within curricula; for retail, this constitutes a listing of 14 different learning fields with 880 work hours overall within a 3-year programme.



The balancing of specificity and generality

- ❖ Need to balance between **detailed** and **vague** learning outcomes descriptions
 - Detailed learning outcomes → clear steer to teachers, assessors, learners, etc.
 - Too precise/prescriptive statements → risk excluding opportunities for local and individual adaptations (“dumbing down” teaching and assessment)
- ❖ The balancing must address **the need for adaptation and innovation** – both for learners and teachers

Assessment

Assessment

- Assessment specifications → identify the **criteria** underpinning assessments.
- Often formulated as **threshold levels** which have to be met by the candidate
- Important reference point for **validation** of non-formal and informal (prior) learning
- Learning outcomes statements in assessment **are more detailed** than qualifications standards and curricula

Levels of mastery in assessment criteria: example from Finish vocational qualification

Assessment specifications can also indicate how a learning experience is **to be graded**, indicating how learning can be achieved at **different levels of complexity and proficiency**

Learning outcomes	Assessment criteria
The student or candidate	The student or candidate
1. serves customers in accordance with the business idea or operating guidelines of the establishment	1. (excellent): 'notes the customer's arrival and serves them politely and on his/her own initiative as a representative of the establishment' 2. (good): 'notes the customer's arrival and serves them politely as a representative of the establishment in accordance with set guidelines' 3. (satisfactory): 'notes the customer's arrival and serves them politely as a representative of the establishment, but occasionally requires assistance'
2. ensures customer satisfaction	1. (excellent): 'actively solicits feedback on services or products, thanks the customer, and forwards the feedback to their supervisors' 2. (good): 'receives customer feedback on services or products, thanks the customer, and forwards the feedback to their supervisors' 3. (satisfactory): 'receives customer feedback on services or products and thanks the customer'

Source: Finnish National Board of Education, 2011, p. 24.

Assessment: key conceptual issues

- Tension between **prescriptive** and **open** statements
 - **Too prescriptive statement may miss to account also for unforeseen learning** (dumbing down teaching and assessment)

Content validity

a phenomenon (for example tasks or skills) which can be **directly and unambiguously observed**

Overlooking this distinction may create a **bias towards the easily observable** tasks and skills

Construct validity

measures **performance indirectly** and in relation to a **theoretically constructed reference**

Balance between **validity** (capture uniqueness of learning experiences), **reliability** (consistent and trustworthy results) as well as **scalability** and costs.

Transversal skills and competence

- 'Transversal skills', 'soft skills', 'Key competence', ;'20th century skills', etc

Transversal skills and competence

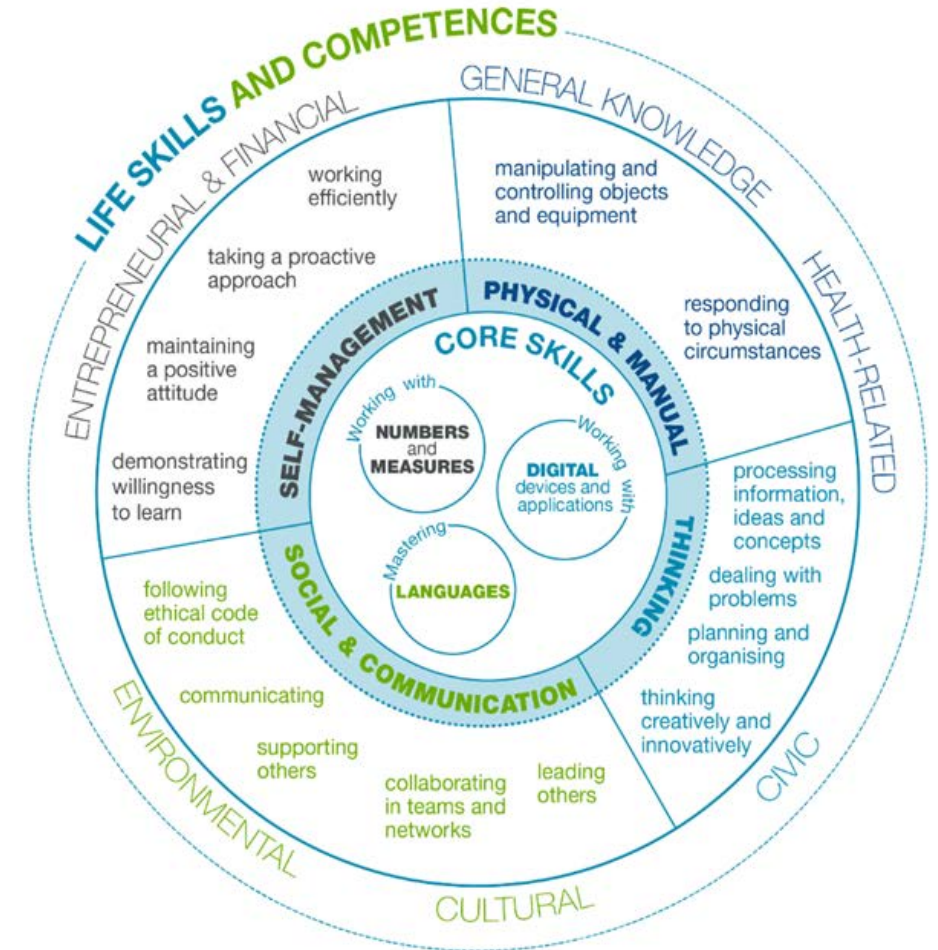
Defined as 'Learned and proven abilities which are commonly seen as necessary or valuable for effective action in virtually any kind of work, learning or life activity' (ESCO Member States Working Group)

- Multidimensional constructs, which require 'unpacking'
- Not easily observable

Terminological model on transversal skills and competence

- Reference point/resource for those defining learning outcomes (multilingual)
- General need for learning outcomes statements to be able, when needed, to **balance** between general knowledge, occupationally specific and transversal skills and competences.
 - Is the focus on
 - communicating,
 - supporting others
 - working with others in a team or networking,
 - leading others??

TRANSVERSAL SKILLS AND COMPETENCES



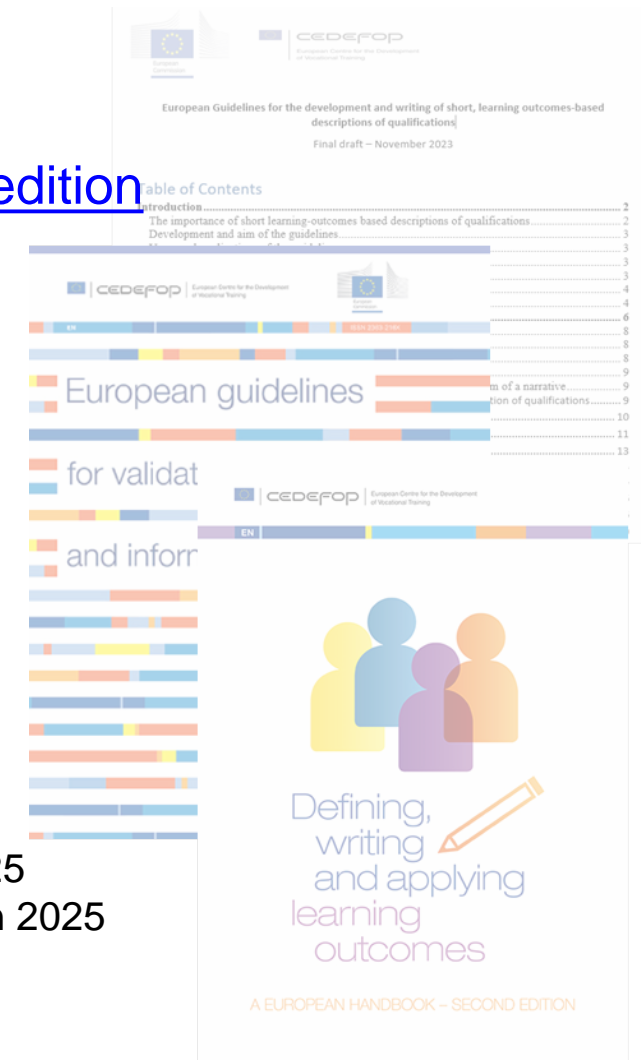
Final considerations

- ❖ Learning outcomes → opportunity to have a **more learner-centred approach and systems**
- ❖ Learning outcomes have **different purposes**
- ❖ They should **not operate in isolation** (or seen as administrative requirements) → lack of alignment can reduce overall impact
- ❖ “**Balancing act**” (broad/narrow; detailed/vague; prescriptive/openness) → awareness of inherent tensions.
- ❖ Important to reflect on enabling factors but also limitations → no single right or wrong → **need to share experiences.**

Recent relevant developments and (ongoing) studies

- [Handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes – second edition](#)
- [European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning](#)
- European guidelines for short descriptions of learning-outcomes based qualifications

- Cedefop study on “[The shift to learning outcomes: rhetoric or reality?](#)”
 - Theme 1: Influence of LO on pedagogical theory and tools - Q2 2024
 - Theme 2: influence of learning outcomes-based curricula on teaching practice - Q4 2024
 - Theme 3: influence of learning outcomes-based curricula in company training – expected in 2025
 - **Theme 4: map and analyse the influence of learning outcomes on assessment** expected in 2025
 - Theme 5: suggestions/lessons for the way forward - expected in 2025





Thank you

For further information:

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Project page

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/themes/learning-outcomes>

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