



# Learning outcomes – some key lessons from Europe

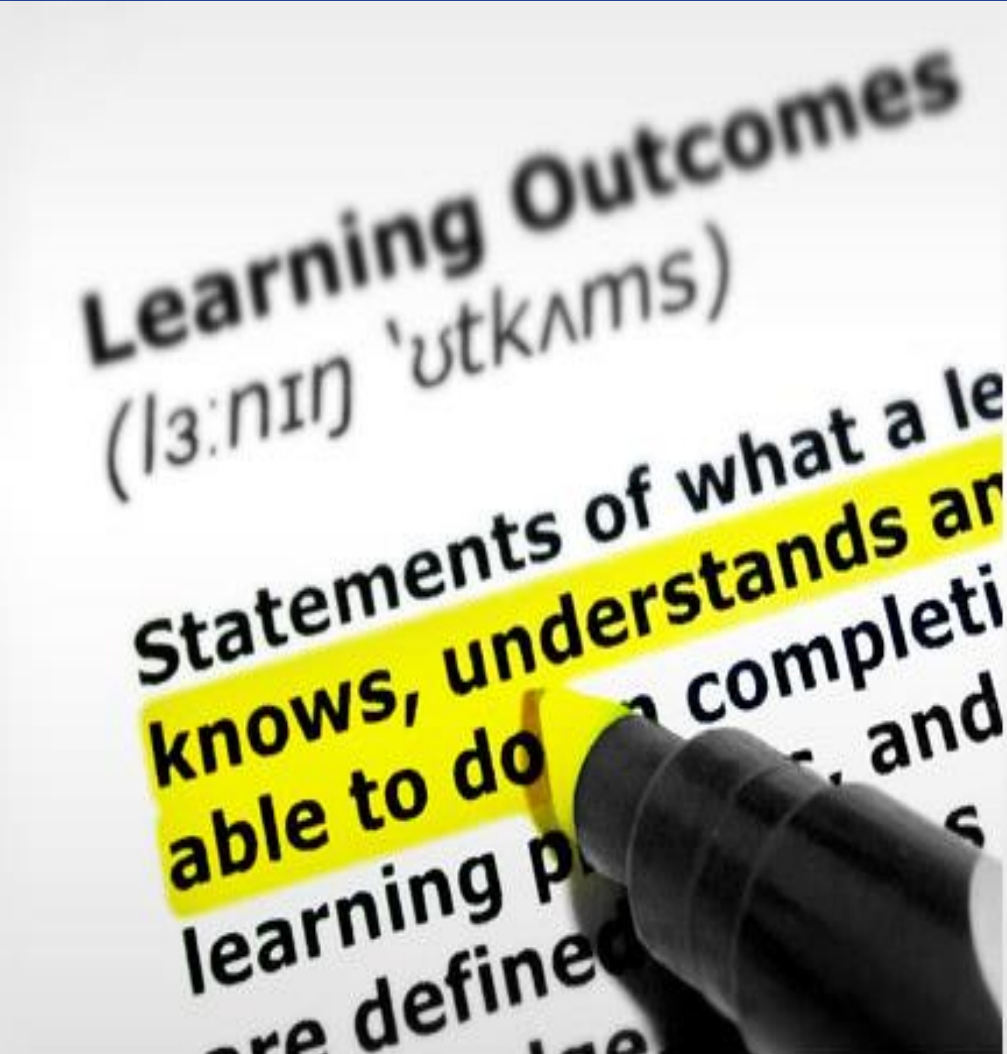
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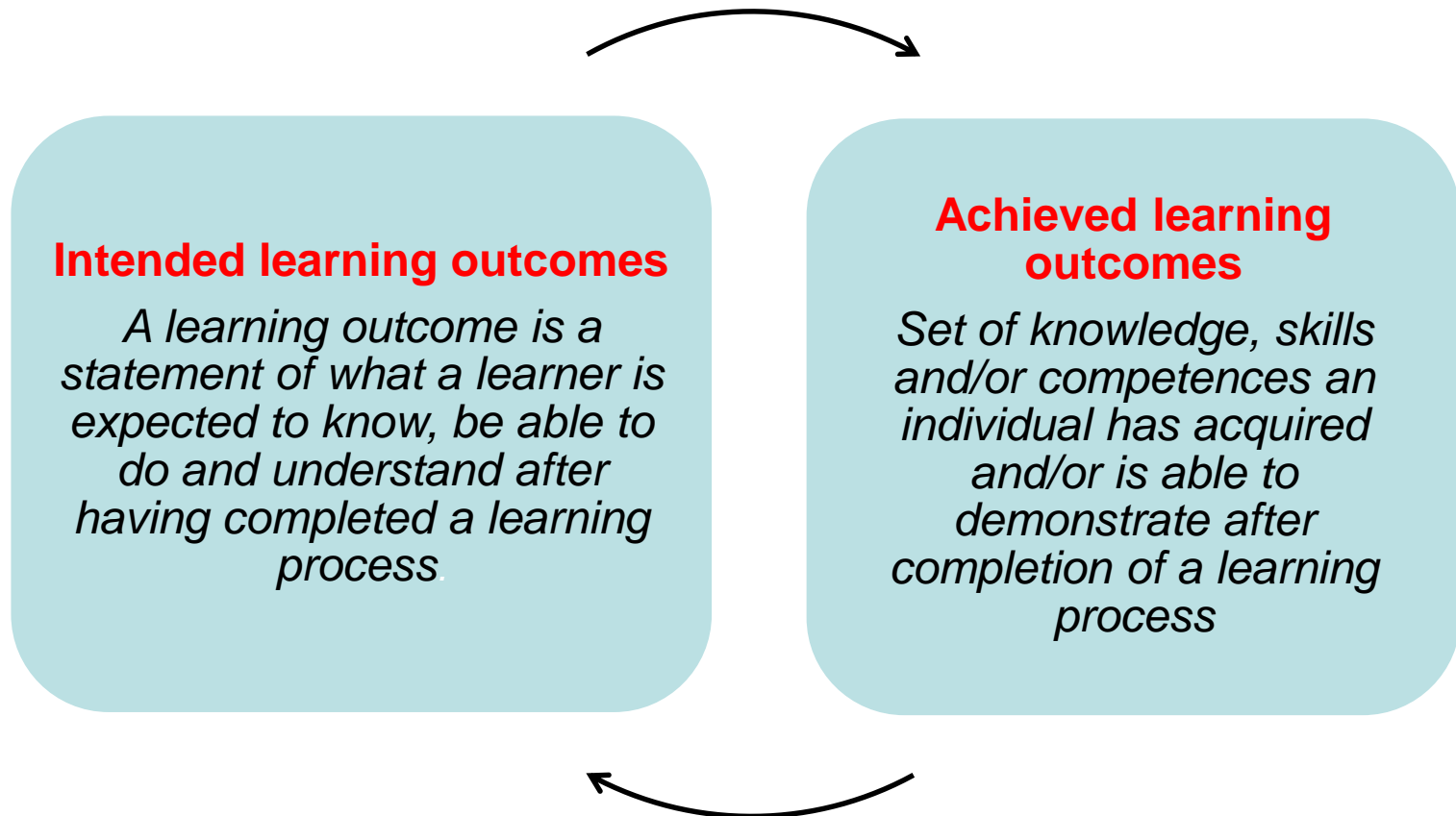
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# Learning outcomes



# The learning outcomes concept



# Learning outcomes in European education and training policies

- National efforts to implement learning outcomes can be traced back to the 1980s
- The learning outcomes principle is – explicitly since 2004 – systematically promoted at European level
- The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) has played a key role, through the promotion of NQFs, in promoting a shift to learning outcomes during the last decade
- The learning outcomes principle can be seen as the ‘glue’ binding together European policies on skills and qualifications (EQF, Bologna process)



# Learning outcomes - the different purposes

Strengthening the learning outcomes approach aims at

Reforming and modernising education-training and the relationship between education and training and the labour market

Influencing three main levels

- In relation to overall national and European policies
- In relation to management of institutions
- In relation to pedagogical reform



# Learning outcomes in national and European policies - aspirations

Learning outcomes :

- Facilitates **the valuing** of all learning, including that which has been acquired outside formal education and training.
- Increases the **transparency** of qualifications for learners and employers.
- Facilitates **progress** in an increasingly complex and diverse education and training landscape.
- Strengthens the **accountability** of education and training
- Increases the **comparability** of qualifications between countries and facilitates the transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes across borders.
- A key to **lifelong and life-wide learning**.





# Learning outcomes as a management tool - aspirations

The shift to learning outcomes :

- Allows for a combination of strategic steering from the top and local autonomy.
- Allows for more consistent design of programmes.
- Forms an important part of quality assurance at the level of institutions; allow for continuous review and renewal
- Is not an isolated phenomenon, but is closely linked to traditions such as Management by Objectives and New Public Management



# Learning outcomes as a pedagogical reform tool - aspirations

The shift to learning outcomes :

- Clarifies the intention of the teaching and learning process.
- Clarifies what is expected from the learner.
- Facilitates, through a consistent alignment of teaching, learning and assessment, a better design of teaching and learning methods.
- Facilitates a more learner-centred process, potentially opening up to active, self-directed and problem-based learning.





# Learning outcomes as a reform tool – Impact?

Cedefop's **2009** study showed an overall shift to learning outcomes across Europe; although with clear differences between countries and education and training sectors

Cedefop's **2016** study on learning outcomes demonstrated that the shift to learning outcomes is gaining speed and that differences between countries and education sectors are diminishing



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# Actual policy impact - Vocational education and training (VET)

- The learning outcomes approach is well established in European VET.
- Almost all countries are now referring to learning outcomes or competences as fundamental to VET
- The learning outcomes principle has become a more explicit and visible building block for VET
  - A way to increase transparency of VET
  - A way to improve relevance of VET
  - A way to put the learner at the centre of the process



# Actual policy impact – Higher education

- A remarkable change has taken place during the last decade. While lagging behind VET in 2006-2007, the learning outcomes principle is rapidly gaining ground across Europe
- An focus on the need to balance the functions of research and teaching
- A tension between the focus on competences and knowledge
- Some countries and institutions resisting the shift
- Differences between disciplines as regards take up
- European coopeartion processes – Bologna process and EQF - matters



# Actual policy impact – Primary and general education

- In compulsory education we observe a shift
  - Revision of national and core curricula
  - Increase focus on key competences
  - Impact of international assessments (PISA)
- General upper secondary education still (as in 2006-2007) have yet to embrace learning outcomes



# Actual policy impact – key factors

## Key drivers of change

- Comprehensive qualifications frameworks
- The introduction of systems for validation and recognition of prior/non-formal and informal learning

## Deeper impact

- More complete and accessible qualification maps
- Systemic reforms, in particular in the area of higher VET (EQF 5-8)
- An opening up of qualifications to experiential and prior learning
- Increased comparability of qualifications in Europe and internationally



# Learning outcomes and management – actual impact?

Seen as a way to combine strategic steering with extensive local autonomy

- We can observe an impact of learning outcomes on curriculum and programme design
- Strengthened institutional overview and control; allows for 'weeding out' sub-standard curricula, programmes and teaching
- Seen as an ambiguous steering instrument – opens up a space for dialogue, not given how this will be filled.

Limited research although some of the challenges are similar to those encountered in relation to Management by objectives (MBO) and New public management (NPM)



# Learning outcomes and pedagogics – actual impact?

Limited research evidence available

- A shift to learning outcomes does not by default lead to a change in teaching and learning
- A shift may create a space for change but implies alignment between
  1. The definition of intended learning outcomes
  2. Choice of teaching and learning methodology and approach
  3. Engaging students and learners
  4. Enabling students and learners
- Learning outcomes can but does not automatically trigger change





# Learning outcomes and pedagogics – actual impact?

- Learning outcomes orient a learning process; they should not contain or restrict it.
- Learning outcomes statements should not be understood as preventing learners to go beyond minimum expectations.
- Learning outcomes statements should assist teachers in identifying and combining teaching methods
- Finding the balance between prescriptive and descriptive learning outcomes is essential



A group of five young men, likely vocational trainees, are standing in a workshop. They are all wearing blue work uniforms and caps. The man on the far left is wearing a white cap with a logo. The other four are wearing blue caps with 'tgm' logos. They are standing in front of industrial equipment, including a large metal structure and various tools. A blue semi-transparent box with white text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# What are key lessons learned?

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# Key lesson – Alignment

The success of Learning outcomes depends on alignment between learning outcomes written for

- Qualification frameworks
- Occupation standards;
- Education and training standards;
- Curricula;
- Teaching and training;
- Assessment requirements?



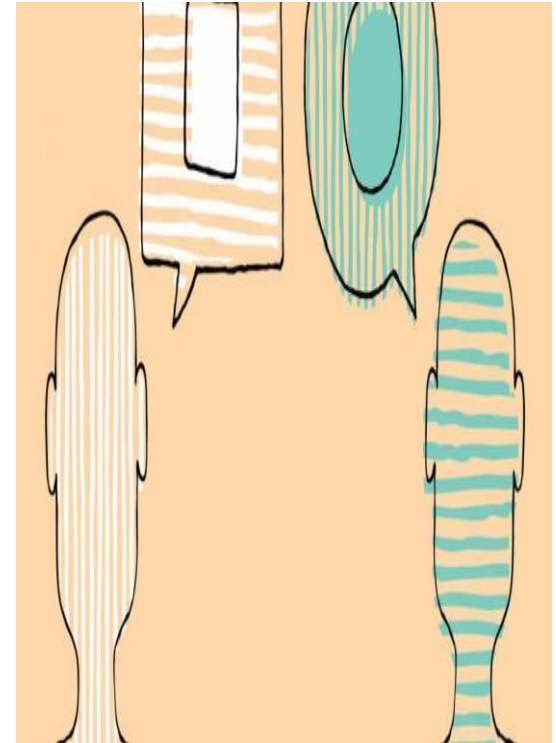


# Key lesson - Theory matters

The writing of learning outcomes operates in a tension between schools of thought

- A behaviouristic tradition will emphasise learning outcomes as result oriented, full-ended, clearly observable and (objectively) measurable,
- A constructivist approach will emphasise the need for learning outcomes to be process-oriented and open-ended, somewhat limiting measurability

Illustrates a strategic-Instrumental vs. communicative/deliberative rationality

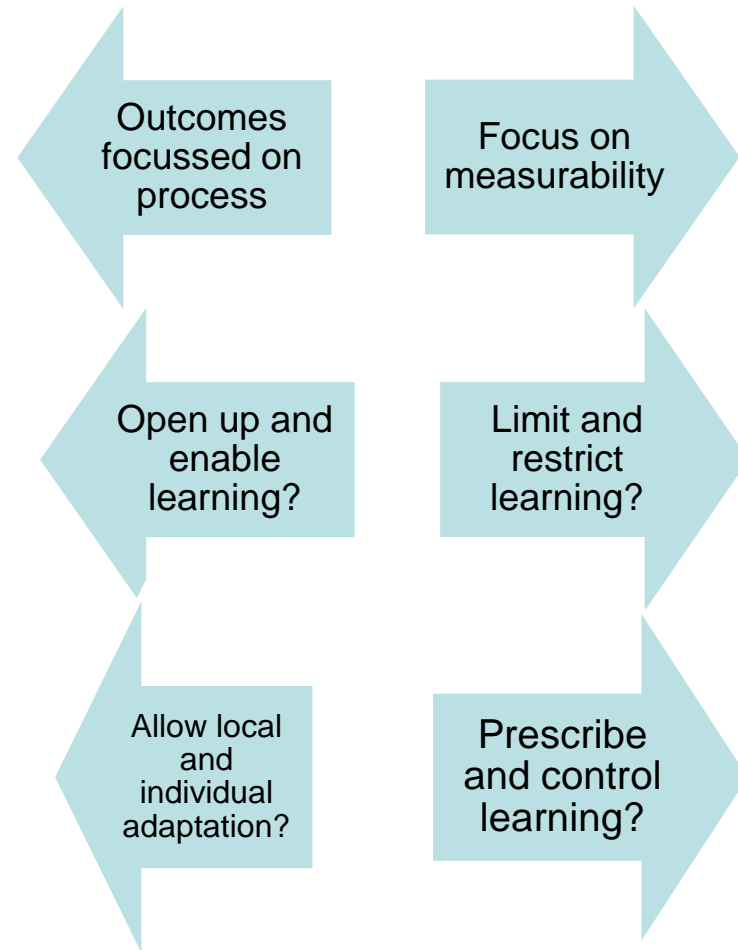


# Key lesson - avoid 'Dumbing down'



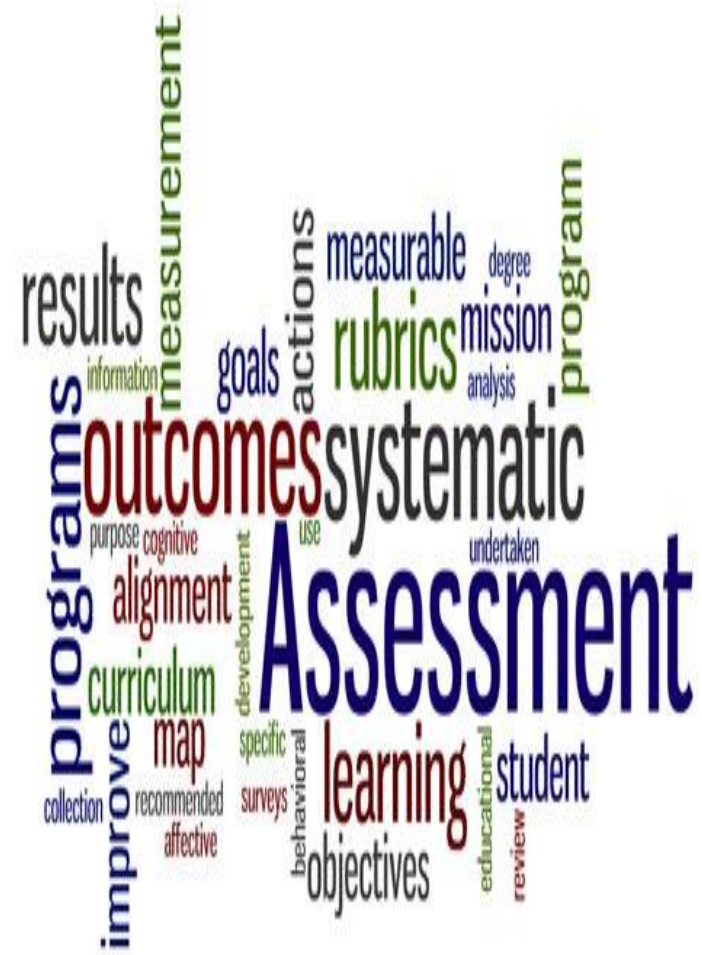
- Learning outcomes need to be defined and written in a way which allows for local adaptation and interpretation by teachers and learners
- Too detailed and prescriptive statements can undermine and lead to a 'dumbing down' of the learning and assessment process.

# Key lesson – be aware of contradictions and tensions



# Key lesson – be aware of the role of assessment

- A shift to learning outcomes can be undermined if not aligned with assessment
- It should be made clear that learning outcomes, written as threshold statements, do not prevent learners to go beyond these thresholds.
- Need to find a balance between reliability and validity







**Thank you for your attention!**

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