



**EQAVET**

European Quality Assurance  
in Vocational Education and Training

Supporting the implementation of the  
European Quality Assurance Reference Framework  
for Vocational Education and Training

# POLICY BRIEF

*This policy brief has been prepared in order to share the results of an EQAVET Peer Learning Activity on the quality assurance processes of defining qualifications based on the learning outcomes (LOs) approach and designing LOs for assessment and certification processes. EQAVET peer learning activities provide a means of discussing, sharing and learning from each other on areas of strategic importance for the successful implementation of the Recommendation on establishing a European quality assurance reference framework for VET. The policy brief reflects the opinions of those who participated in the peer learning activity and does not constitute an official European Commission or EQAVET position.*

**Peer Learning  
Activity on**

## **Quality assurance processes of defining qualifications based on the Learning Outcomes (LOs) approach and designing LOs for assessment and certification processes**

*Participating countries: CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, HR, HU, IE, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO,  
FYR Macedonia and Kosovo*

### **SUMMARY**

*This policy note is based on the peer learning activity (PLA) organised by EQAVET in partnership with the Polish National Reference Point (the National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing Education) and the Educational Research Institute in Warsaw, on 14-15 April 2016. The PLA, which is part of the [EQAVET 2016-17 work programme](#), brought together from 20 countries representatives of VET providers, government agencies and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy. Some participants represented a Member State's Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP). NRPs were established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and play a central role in supporting the vocational education and training (VET) quality assurance arrangements in their system.*

*This policy brief is not a verbatim report; rather it analyses the issues that were felt to be important in an EQAVET context, given the importance of the LOs approach for the implementation of EU and national education and training policies and reforms. The PLA was informed by a background paper and an analysis of a questionnaire based on participants' experiences of using quality assurance (QA) approaches on designing LOs for assessment and certification processes. More information on this PLA is available on the EQAVET website [here](#).*

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

**The European Quality Assurance for VET Framework (EQAVET Framework)** is set out in the 2009 Recommendation from the European Parliament and Council<sup>1</sup>. It builds on earlier work at a European level, and seeks to enhance European cooperation in vocational education and training, by developing and using a Common Quality Assurance Framework.

The **EQAVET Recommendation** invites Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement in their VET systems. It proposes doing this through the use of a quality assurance (QA) and improvement cycle based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review. EQAVET is a Framework that allows individual Member States to develop their own arrangements in order to reform, in a convergent way, their QA systems.

The concept of "**learning outcomes**" (LOs) is extensively used in all major EU initiatives in education and training. It has become a crucial concept in the "recognition and transparency tools" developed at EU level, such as the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (the [EQF Recommendation](#)), the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit Transfer System for vocational education and training ([ECVET](#)), and the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the [Validation of Non-](#)

<sup>1</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (2009/C 155/01) - [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32009H0708\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32009H0708(01))

**Formal and Informal Learning.** This is recognised in Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a Single Community Framework for the Transparency of Qualifications and Competences ([Europass](#)) and, of course, in the EQAVET Recommendation already mentioned.

## Peer Learning Activity OBJECTIVES

**This EQAVET Peer Learning Activity (PLA) focused on identifying quality assurance criteria for the defining and describing of learning outcomes.**

The aim of EQAVET PLAs is to create an opportunity for discussion, reflection, and the sharing of knowledge and experience among participants, that can, in turn, feed into the work of the Network.

The discussions were informed and prompted by the presentation of experiences from three Member States: Poland, Spain and the Netherlands. The CEDEFOP's study *'The quality of certification in IVET'*<sup>2</sup> was also presented.

The PLA was organised into two thematic blocks:

1. The quality assurance process for defining qualifications and qualification standards based on a LOs approach
2. The quality assurance process for assessment and certification of LOs

During the first thematic block, participants reflected on:

- **What quality assurance mechanisms are needed in order to define qualifications based on LOs?** (discussion pointers: involvement of relevant stakeholders; standards and design of curriculum; designing and reviewing processes in order to respond to the changing needs of the labour market and society).
- **What are the QA processes that ensure the validity of LOs and assist the writing of qualifications based on LOs?**

In the second block, participants reflected on:

- **What quality assurance mechanisms are needed in order to assess and certify qualifications based on LOs?** (discussion pointers: clear external and internal processes; selection and competences of assessors; assessment methods and tools; stakeholder involvement; appeal procedures).
- **What QA processes are needed in order to define the assessment/certification standards based on LOs?**

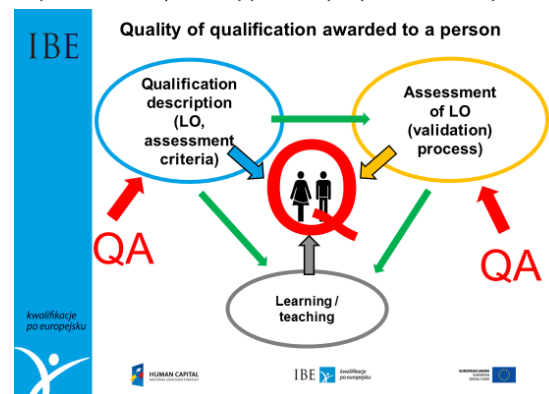
## CASE STUDIES

The case studies presented at the PLA highlighted a variety of different QA approaches to defining and designing qualifications based on the LOs; and to assessing and certifying LOs.

### **CASE STUDY from POLAND: Quality assurance of qualifications – an approach to an Integrated Qualification System in Poland**

The Polish hosts presented their experience (initiative developed in 2012) in designing and implementing a qualifications system based on the LOs concept and associated QA arrangements (in relation to the so called market qualifications). The approach proposes an emphasised shift from ensuring the quality of the education and training process to the quality of qualification awarded to a person, no matter how these qualifications were reached (by formal, non-formal or informal learning). Consequently, the main QA procedures refer to qualification description (LOs and assessment criteria) and to LOs assessment (i.e. the validation process).

In this respect, the QA aims are to define qualifications based on the real needs of the labour market, including LOs and verification criteria, requirements for assessment / validation (methods, assessors' competencies) and in order to ensure that assessment is valid and reliable. The stakeholders are involved throughout this process – mainly in describing and assessing LOs and in organising training based on LOs, as well.



### **CASE STUDY from SPAIN: The Learning Outcomes in VET Diplomas**

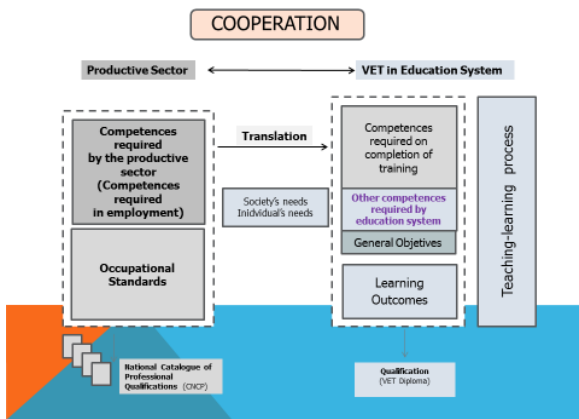
The Spanish representatives described their experience of using LOs to define qualifications (and make specific QA arrangements), by "translating" the competences required in employment, as described in the national Occupational Standards. The competences required at

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5551>

the completion of a training process are described in terms of LOs. All stages of this “translation” process involve close cooperation between the industry sector and the VET system.

In addition, Spain presented the technical issues involved in this process, i.e. definition of the LOs (emphasising, mainly, what a person is able to do in a work context). The LOs resulting from the educational process are described in terms of contextualised competences, closely related to the real work activity and indicating the skills and level of mastery required to carry out a professional task.


Another important aspect of the Spanish approach is the importance given to the assessment criteria (“statements that specify what a student is expected to do in order to show that he/she can implement the knowledge and skills acquired and, thus, achieve a learning outcome”).



## CASE STUDY from THE NETHERLANDS: The learning outcomes approach, a description of VET qualifications in units of LOs

The Netherlands delegation described a flexible and adaptable system of defining LOs. The starting points of this process are the qualifications defined at national level and the occupational profiles defined at sector level. Following continuous dialogue among all relevant stakeholders, qualifications now include fixed, pre-defined components, but also optional parts, defined at VET provider level (together with the relevant sector committees), and chosen by learners.

In this respect, the VET providers formulate the LOs and verify the qualification level from the national qualifications framework, on the basis of specific descriptors (embedded in the qualification framework). The VET providers have to observe QA standards in all parts of their provision, including assessment and certification.



**Dutch perspective on LO approach**

- Dutch Qualification framework based on learning outcomes
- Focus on complete qualifications for IVET and CVET
- Occupational profile developed by branches of industry
- Occupational profile is basis for developing qualifications; Dutch format is available and mandatory
- SBB and sectoral committees (= providers and employers): give advice on qualifications (SBB= cooperation organisation for VET and Labour Market)
- Ministry: sets qualifications

## 2<sup>nd</sup> CASE STUDY from POLAND: Designing and delivering assessment of learning outcomes

Reliability, accuracy and honesty of the effects of learning outcomes as the element of assurance of the quality of the qualification– in the formative and summative assessment

	Formative assessment	Summative assessment (external examination CKE/OKE)
• Reliability	Yes	Yes
• Accuracy	Yes – depends on subjective systems of assessment (responsibility of the school)	Not entirely (not all the learning outcomes can be verified during the vocational exam)
• Validity	Rather not – depends on subjective systems of assessment (lack of standardization)	Yes

The second Polish case study described the ways the LOs are assessed and certified at “grass-root” level in IVET, following the new national VET qualifications based on LOs. At this level, the reliability, the accuracy and the validity of the assessment of the learning outcomes become the main values of the QA system.

The analysis went more in depth, describing how formative and summative (by external examinations) assessments observe these basic values.

In this process, the role (and accountability) of VET providers in designing training programmes, but also in assessing (formative and summative) the LOs is increased. But to support this new enhanced role of the VET providers, there is a need to define and present assessment criteria, together with the assessed LOs. The presentation showed challenges of providing training for LOs without verification criteria.

By the introduction of the assessment criteria, the VET providers will be encouraged to define and to deliver their own adequate, “tailor made” training programmes and to depend less on the curriculum frameworks



or training programmes developed at national level.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> CASE STUDY from THE NETHERLANDS: Validation, assessment and certification of units based on learning outcomes for the defence staff

This case study presented, as well, the concrete experience, at provider level, in assessing and certifying the LOs, in a sector with its own specificity, the military one: the military qualifications are needed not only to qualify people, but also to ensure, after a well determined number of years, the transition in the “civil” life via a process that ensures the lifelong learning dimension of the provision of education and training.

Therefore, partnership among different stakeholders, on one hand, and among VET providers, on the other, becomes crucial in order to ensure a homogenous qualification / re-qualification process.

Moreover, the partnership ensures that the VET providers meet the established assessment standards regarding: the assessment instruments (purchased or developed); the processes for developing assessment instruments; the processes for student assessment; the decision-making process for the awarding of qualifications; the QA of all processes; the quality of staff; the involvement of stakeholders etc.

**Paars Partnerschap**



**Paars Partnerschap**



**Learning outcomes & Qualification**



## DISCUSSION & REFLECTIONS

All five case studies highlighted that **the LOs approach is in widespread use and provides a basis for designing and developing qualifications frameworks in the EU**. However, the LOs approach is not always implemented in the same way, having regard to differences among national VET systems, their history, culture and traditions<sup>3</sup>:

Due to this diversity, the PLA served as a means of sharing different practices and concerns; and of learning from the experiences and challenges encountered by others. In both situations, participants agreed that there are **key QA elements** that need to be considered in relation to the LOs approach:

- There is a need to involve relevant stakeholders in order to ensure the relevance of the qualifications and of the defined LOs for all economic sectors. However, the level of involvement (VET provider, regional, national) and the methods of involvement (“top-down” or “bottom-up”) can be different. This will depend mainly on the degree of centralisation in the VET system.
- The structure of the qualifications system and the use of national standards differ from country to country. Systems that are “output”/“outcome” oriented tend to attach less importance to standardisation than those systems that are highly systematic (for “inputs”, “processes” and outputs). For instance, some systems accept different curricula for the achievement of similar LOs, other systems have a specific curriculum framework for specific LOs.
- The degree of “sophistication” was also different: some systems need quality assured “translation” processes in order to define qualifications, using different categories of standards (occupational, educational, for assessment etc.), other systems don’t.
- Some systems include large numbers of simple LOs (“granularity” of LOs), while others include more complex LOs. In any case, it seems that often there is no simple “one-to-one” correspondence between standards and curriculum units and LOs.
- The assessment and validation of LOs seems to be a crucial element despite the variation in approaches among countries (different levels of standardisation and regulation, in the degree of “internalisation”/“externalisation”, in the content of the summative and formative assessment, the methods and instruments used, etc).
- It is crucial that all relevant stakeholders have the necessary expertise to design a LOs approach: the clarity and comprehensibility of LOs need to be ensured.

## EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

Participants in the PLA agreed that:

**The LOs approach may increase the transparency of qualifications, their relevance to the labour market and meet learner needs and mobility requirements from a lifelong learning perspective.**

How to ensure that the LOs approach is effective:

1. Given the diversity of VET systems in the EU, there is an increased need for cooperation, and shared and common understanding to underpin future EU policies.

<sup>3</sup> The Background paper highlighted some of these differences, as mentioned in different studies (from CEDEFOP and international ones), including papers developed by the EQAVET Network. View the background paper [here](#).

2. There is a need to ensure the balance between **validity** and the **reliability** in the process of assessing LOs (see Figure<sup>4</sup>): a lack of validity means a weak answer to the labour market needs and a mismatch between the LOs achieved by the learner and those needed at work. A low degree of reliability has a negative impact on the consistency and accuracy of assessment and certification outcomes, leading to stakeholders mistrust in the qualification itself. In order to achieve this, there is a need to **increase cooperation** among Member States in the development and updating of EU recognition and transparency tools.

3. Given the diversity of EU VET systems, policies regarding LOs, should allow **flexible qualification paths**, including balancing core curriculum with optional curriculum and assessing, validating and certifying qualifications based on informal and non-formal learning.



## Increasing trust in certification



## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The **QA systems**, whether at VET system and provider level, are a crucial element that ensure:

- the validity and reliability of LOs and assessment of LOs
- increased cooperation among stakeholders at EU and national levels
- that LOs are sufficiently flexible to respond to the changing demands of the labour market.

**RECOMMENDATIONS** for the **design and updating of QA systems and procedures in order to accommodate a LOs approach**:

- Include shared QA procedures at all levels of the process: in LOs definition and planning, curriculum design and implementation, LOs assessment, validation and certification and when reviewing the overall process at system and provider levels.
- Include in LOs transversal skills/soft skills/key/social competencies– and “learning how to learn”; not only the vocational aspect.
- The labour market analysis should consider both present and future needs: we should not only compile an analysis of existing needs, but also forecast future needs.
- Involve relevant stakeholders in all phases: cooperation and ownership of LOs definition and certification processes are essential to build mutual trust.
- Ensuring the “horizontal” (among education and training sub-sectors) and the “vertical” (among levels) consistency of LOs design and validation, for both approaches (“bottom-up” and “top-down”).
- Using clear language which is accessible to learners, employers, learning providers and decision makers. This ensures transparency, inclusiveness and visibility of LOs. In this respect, the existence of a specific framework document, at national level, defining the basic expectations for this process, would be useful.
- In order to build a shared language, ownership and trust, stakeholders need to share their views. This can be achieved by developing and organising common training, workshops, conferences, seminars etc.
- In order to make the LOs approach more effective and to continuously improve VET provision, the use of appropriate indicators is necessary (e.g. “employability” and other indicators mentioned in Annex II of the EQAVET Recommendation).
- Assessment criteria should be included in LOs to ensure flexible learning paths, and the validity and reliability of the certification process. The “criterion referenced” summative and formative assessment should also include practical examinations/skills demonstrations. A variety of methodologies (e.g. written and oral examinations, simulations, practical examinations, portfolios etc.) are required.
- Implementing both internal evaluation and external evaluation/inspections, particularly in LO assessment. This ensures the independence of appeal procedures and promotes confidence. The results of both types of evaluation should be used to review the VET system and processes/procedures at VET provider level.
- Assessors/evaluators for LOs should be chosen according to rigorous selection criteria and receive specific training in order to provide a common understanding of LOs and assessment criteria, methods and tools. A national (or sector) register of assessors would be useful.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see the CEDEFOP input presentation “Quality assurance of certification in IVET, Findings of a Cedefop study” - [http://eqavet.eu/Libraries/Warsaw\\_PLA\\_April\\_2016/Cedefop\\_ppt\\_QA\\_in\\_IVET\\_certification\\_EQAVET\\_PLA\\_14\\_April\\_2016.sflb.ashx](http://eqavet.eu/Libraries/Warsaw_PLA_April_2016/Cedefop_ppt_QA_in_IVET_certification_EQAVET_PLA_14_April_2016.sflb.ashx)