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Skills and qualifications strategies; Multilingualism policy

PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY 'INCREASING SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACH AND QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS'

28-29 November 2013, Leuven, Belgium

Summary report

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

On 28 and 29 November 2013, a Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was held in Leuven, Belgium, focusing on **'increasing synergies between the implementation of the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance arrangements'**.

This PLA was hosted by the European Commission, and was organised as a follow-up to the Irish Presidency conference 'Quality assurance in qualifications frameworks' in March 2013 and the joint meeting of the EQF Advisory Group and the Structural Reforms Working Group under the Bologna Process in September 2013. The event was attended by approximately 45 participants from various European countries.

PLA objectives

The main objectives of the PLA were to allow delegates to:

- develop a better understanding of the various approaches to quality assurance using learning outcomes at national and institutional level;

- develop a common understanding of what kind of quality assurance criteria and arrangements are needed to support the learning outcomes approach in vocational education and training and in higher education at national and at European levels; and

- explore how synergies between the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance can be strengthened at European level.

Recent discussions on the implementation of the European qualifications frameworks – EQF and QF-EHEA – have called for closer links between the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance arrangements at national and European levels. It is widely acknowledged that while the use of the learning outcomes approach can make qualifications more transparent, quality assurance systems can provide important safeguards to ensure its trustworthy implementation throughout the education and training system.

The evaluations of EQF and EQAVET and the revision of the ESG (European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area) also urge further explicit links between the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance principles in order to support coherent implementation at European levels and provide clear guidance to countries in the implementation of the various European tools.

Purpose of this report

This report summarises the discussions that took place during the PLA. It is written for a wider audience than those who participated in the PLA in order to share information with the wide range of organisations responsible for developing national frameworks and referencing qualifications to the EQF.

This report should be used to support the work of the Commission and participants in the PLA in disseminating the results of the activities of the PLA to countries' stakeholders and other social partners.

The report is structured according to the objectives of the PLA and draws on a range of presentations, country cases and workshop discussions that formed the PLA. A full list of the agenda for the PLA is included in Annex A.

2 PLA STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

The PLA took place over two days and joined experts from vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE). Prior to the PLA, delegates received a background report and further related background material.

Day 1

Day 1 began with welcoming addresses by Bryan Maguire, member of the Structural Reforms Working Group under the Bologna Process, and by Anita Kremo, European Commission DG EAC.

It was emphasised that, after several European instruments have been put in place to facilitate the transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications during the last decade, the focus now is on achieving a stronger integration of these elements, towards achieving a so-called 'European area of skills and qualifications' (EASQ). The learning outcomes approach plays an important role in this context; it has the potential to make qualifications more transparent, to enable greater links between education and training and the labour market, and also to act as a 'binding agent' between those different European transparency tools. The speakers emphasized that a shared understanding of quality assurance across countries is an important factor for promoting transnational mobility of learners.

Jens Bjornavold, Cedefop, introduced the topic of the PLA and examined in particular the learning outcomes approach, its implementation and its implications for quality assurance processes. This was followed by a presentation from Hannele Seppälä, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, on the outcomes of the 'Learning Outcomes in External Quality Assurance Approaches' study by the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA). Sean Feerick, of the EQAVET Secretariat, then briefly presented the outcomes of the EQAVET mapping project 'Quality assurance procedures in the processes of certification, curricula setting, accreditation and training of trainers in European VET systems'.

After these plenary presentations each participant was invited to attend two workshop sessions. While the first session focused on discussing national case studies from vocational education and training, the second session featured examples from higher education. Each workshop was attended by a balanced mix of experts from the fields of VET, HE, learning outcomes and quality assurance. Discussions in the workshops were stimulated by a specific case study presentation. Day One was concluded with discussion on the lessons learned from the cases presented.

Day 1 of this PLA included an interesting mix of national case studies, survey presentations and group discussions. The main key messages can be summarised as follows:

- Permeability between VET and HE. There is need for more synergy between the different QA systems, in order to develop trust between VET and HE (and between other systems as well) and to facilitate flexible pathways of progression.

- The importance of building a natural *culture* of quality assurance and continuous improvement.

- Practitioners need to be trained for their work with learning outcomes (teachers and other quality assurance workers).

- The involvement of the main stakeholders in the process, at various stages has been a recurring topic. Stakeholders include labour-market representatives and social partners, but students as 'customers' are also mentioned in this context.

Day 2

Following Day 1 – which could be described as a stocktake of success factors, challenges and potentially useful ways forward - for Day 2 the focus shifted towards identifying synergies between the various approaches used in VET and HE at national level and between the European quality assurance tools. To start the day participants were asked to discuss potential synergies in two groups – one with VET representatives, and one with HE representatives – and then present the results to the others to discuss them.

The final session started with introductory contributions on the current evaluation of EQAVET (input by Sophie Weisswange, DG EAC), the evaluation of the EQF (input by Anita Kremo, DG EAC) and the ongoing revision of the EHEA European Standards and Guidelines (input by Stefan Delplace, Eurashe). This was followed by a discussion on how the European quality assurance tools can ensure and improve the use of learning outcomes.

3   **INTRODUCTION TO THE PLA: INCREASING SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACH AND QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS**

Participants were asked to indicate what the title of this event implies for them.

The key points mentioned by the participants were:

- The need to also focus on the difference between quality and quality assurance.
- The need to include the quality assurance arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- The limits of learning outcomes and the need to take into account inputs to education and training.
- Stronger connections between VET & HE, in particular in the field of quality assurance; link between ECTS & ECVET.
- The need to focus on integrating the different systems, rather than building 'shaky' bridges.
- The way to *technically* achieve the much-cited common understanding between the different parties.
- Finding out not only about the quality of learning outcomes, but also about the quality assurance of the learning outcomes *approach*.
- Avoid making VET a dead-end learning pathway and enabling a transition to HE.
- The importance of a *coordinated* learning outcomes approach.

The implications of the learning outcomes approach and its implications on quality assurance

In his introductory presentation, Jens Bjornavold discussed the implications of the shift towards learning outcomes that Europe is currently experiencing, and stakeholders' expectations as well as concerns towards this movement.

The learning outcomes principle has been systematically promoted in the EU policy agenda for education, training and employment since 2004. It is often regarded as the 'glue' that binds together a wide range of initiatives taken during recent years, such as the EQF, ECVET, Europass or ESCO. However, this does not mean that the concept of learning outcomes orientation itself is a recent one.

The most important challenge in dealing with learning outcomes is how to move from expectation to actual outcome, and how quality assurance can be used to support this transition. This link between quality assurance and learning outcomes is critical. Existing quality assurance arrangements need to take into account how LO are defined and how they are going to be transformed into actual outcomes of learning.

As for the expectations towards learning outcomes, the emphasis at policy level is clearly on promoting the transparency, quality and relevance of education and training, and on facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning. At practitioner level, the expectations have a different focus and are more targeted towards the added value for the individual learner (setting clear learning targets, improving motivation, promoting flexible learning pathways); towards providing better guidance for teachers; and towards providing a clear reference point for assessment.

Similarly, the concerns towards learning outcomes differ depending on whether we look at the policy or practitioner level. It is in particular the concerns at practitioner level that play a very important role for quality assurance:

- Do we risk reducing the scope and richness of learning?
- Do we risk undermining the vision of open and active learning?
- Is there a risk that learning outcomes reduce consistency between institutions?
- Is there a risk that learning outcomes decrease rather than increase transparency?

Presentation of the outcomes of the NOQA study – 'Learning Outcomes in External Quality Assurance Approaches'

Hannele Seppälä, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, presented the central outcomes of this study. The NOQA network is the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education, which was established in 2003 by the national external QA agencies of five Northern countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland[1]. This project, the 11th NOQA project, explored how learning outcomes are applied in the external, quality assurance approaches of higher education, with special emphasis on the collection, assessment and use of data.

The results from this study have shown that the Nordic countries have implemented learning outcomes in various ways, in accordance with national policy and educational traditions. As regards the overarching qualifications frameworks EQF and QF-EHEA, the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) of these countries have been either based on one or both of these frameworks. With the exception of Finland, learning outcomes currently play a central role in the external QA approaches of all countries studied.

Key points

- Even when comparing countries that share many similarities (e.g. Northern Europe), the approaches to quality assurance turn out to be diverse. One cannot expect harmony across countries nor across sectors.
- The philosophy behind the different external QA approaches has a significant impact on how learning outcomes are applied and used.
- Learning outcomes orientation has provided a common, transparent language for the design of programmes and for assessing the level and cohesion of programmes. Also, it has helped to develop clear standards for describing the level of a programme.
- Learning outcomes provide a more holistic view of study programmes and can help enhance their transparency and credibility.
- Labour market representatives play an important role in the quality assurance of the relevance of study programmes.
- An audit with the main focus on quality management of educational activities, and not all activities of a HE institution, is better able to incorporate learning outcomes in evaluations, as it helps avoid a too general view.
- As regards the methodological challenges associated with the learning outcomes (LO) approach, it has been observed that very generic learning outcomes descriptors

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[1]   Iceland participated as an observer in the current NOQA project.

(or the use of descriptors from the NQFs) do not provide sufficient information to students, the labour market and other stakeholders.

- The assessment of actually achieved learning outcomes is considered feasible, although it does present certain challenges.

- As to whether the use of learning outcomes can help to secure academic standards, it is pointed out that learning outcomes only help to secure *minimum* standards.

Presentation of the outcomes of the EQAVET mapping 'Quality assurance procedures in the processes of certification, curricula setting, accreditation and training of trainers in European VET systems'[2]

Sean Feerick, of the EQAVET Secretariat, briefly introduced the EQAVET framework and presented the outcomes of this mapping exercise, with a focus on the quality assurance of learning outcomes in vocational education and training.

EQAVET is a reference instrument to help Member States promote and monitor the improvement of their VET systems. EQAVET provides a systematic approach towards quality assurance, which Member States are invited to use on a voluntary basis: the EQAVET quality cycle, underpinned by a list of ten quality indicators. The central idea of EQAVET is to improve the *culture* of quality assurance in VET.

The aim of this mapping exercise of QA procedures in VET, which was launched in 2010, was to provide an overview analysis, a snapshot of the state of a VET system at a particular point in time, in the form of a matrix, in order to explore the underlying quality assurance mechanisms. This should help increase transparency and mutual understanding of the very diverse systems and processes that are in place in vocational education and training. It is pointed out that the outcomes of this project represent a description of the state of play of quality assurance in VET rather than an analysis of the systems and process; some aspects might have changed since the evidence was gathered.

Key points

- The results of the study clearly illustrate that the VET context is very diverse, with significant differences across countries and sectors. They also highlight the importance of strengthening the cooperation between EQAVET, ECVET and the EQF, in particular with regard to the more technical issues.

- All countries have systems for assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes, acquired in formal settings, especially for IVET. These results may, however, not be universally applicable to all segments of the VET sector. Many assessment systems are operating with learning outcomes, although there are also some 'nebulous' aspects to the way learning outcomes are assessed across countries.

- Sometimes the reference points for one initiative at the European level cooperate more than between the different reference points at the national level.

- In VET, the stakeholders, and social partners in particular, play an essential role. And one can observe a trend from a purely consultative role to a more 'deliberate' role of involvement.

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[2]   This report can be downloaded from the EQAVET website, www.eqavet.eu.

- Learning in real working conditions is becoming more important; work-based learning in VET is now seen as a major component of good-quality education and training that prepares people for successful entry into the labour market.

- Importance of learner focus: learners will generally not care whether their education is labelled 'HE' or 'VET', as long as they can follow their learning pathway without obstacles. Even after conducting mobility projects for more than 20 years, there are still significant problems for learners to have their mobility periods recognised – Erasmus+ will also have to work on that.

- There is the urgent need to develop a common vocabulary. When VET, HE and adult education representatives work together, they tend to use different languages for expressing relatively similar things. These differences of language, and also context, come up on the table only when we work together on specific projects; it is thus important to focus our work in particular on the technical aspects.

4   QUALITY ASSURANCE SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING OUTCOMES. NATIONAL CASE STUDIES

For the two workshop sessions of the day, participants were divided into three working groups – with each one representing a balanced mix of experts from the fields of VET, HE, learning outcomes and quality assurance. While the first session focused on discussing national case studies from vocational education and training, the second session featured examples from higher education. Day 1 concluded with discussion on the lessons learned from the examples presented.

Country cases – vocational education and training

The Netherlands Ron Creutzburg, ECABO	The Dutch organisation of senior secondary vocational education and training includes 17 so-called 'Centres of Expertise', i.e. sectoral organisations which act as 'intermediary' between education and the labour market. They act on national and regional levels as strategic partners for ministries, municipalities, social partners and vocational education and training institutions. The Centres perform legal tasks in the field of the development and maintenance of the qualifications structure for senior secondary VET, and the accreditation of work placement companies. Furthermore, they carry out labour market research. They are governed by a tripartite board of social partners – employers and unions – and education. The quality assurance process is organised as an elaborate cycle, in which labour market representatives are involved at various stages. This leads to a strong cooperation between VET and the labour market at regional level. Qualifications profiles are included in the quality assurance process; they include core tasks and work processes. They describe the learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, hard and soft skills and behaviours. Qualification profiles are generic in nature in order to allow schools to adapt to regional demands.
Slovenia Aleksandra Grašič, CPI (National Institute vor Vocational Education and Training in Slovenia)	Vocational education in Slovenia has undergone two major phases of reform in the past two decades. The first phase (1996-2000) marked the beginnings of the learning outcomes orientation, the introduction of occupational standards as a basis for educational programmes as well as the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ). Within the second phase of reform (2001-2012), curricula became modularly structured and competence based; in addition, criterion-referenced assessment and a student-centred approach were introduced. The Slovene system has implemented a set of measures to support the quality assurance of LO. These include: • assessment of LO is partly external[3]; • participation in international measurements (PISA); • monitoring of NVQ system through the CPI institute; • use of peer-review activities; • evaluation council, which prepares proposals for improvements; • self-evaluation at provider level;

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[3]   VET programmes at upper secondary level typically last for three years and end with an internal final exam. Technical programmes, however, end with a 'vocational matura' examination, which is partly external.

	system of national vocational qualifications is revised every five years; and
	license of assessors to be revised every four years.
	CPI provided active support to the schools for at least one year after the introduction of the new curricula (with the old curricula, everything was prescribed). The LO approach has led to more decentralization, autonomy and accountability at school level. Teachers' work has become more demanding (in terms of planning what and how to teach, how to assess), and they needed support to face these challenges.

Country cases – higher education

Spain Anna Prades, AQU Catalunya	Anna Prades presented the 'VSMA Framework' for quality assurance that is applied by AQU Catalunya, the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency. The learning outcomes approach is integrated into each phase of the VSMA framework. Quality assurance of learning outcomes occurs through • self-assessment report (tables, LO mapping) • analysis of academic indicators • graduate survey (skills gap & employability indicators) • from 2014 on: student survey & employer survey.
Poland Ewa Chmielecka, Educational Research Institute Warsaw	Higher education in Poland applies a 'binary' system of quality assurance, which combines a voluntary bottom-up (based on universities' initiative) and a compulsory top-down approach (Polish Accreditation Committee, PAC). Both elements use standards and criteria based on LO. As of 2011, all HE programmes have to be described in terms of LO. HEI thus had to meet the challenge of redesigning their curricula within just one academic year. PAC is responsible for the quality assurance of the LO approach. One major challenge was to create a LO matrix for each curriculum, which helps identify overlaps and empty spaces (e.g. LO which are not included, or LO which are overrepresented). Results of PAC's evaluation of LO implementation: • In particular at the beginning, there was (as expected) significant reluctance from the academic community. Meanwhile, almost 50 percent of the respondents report satisfaction with the new approach. • Initially, there was a tendency to rewrite old curricula in 'new' LO terminology. Only with the growing awareness of the benefits of the LO approach, the academic community realized that a very powerful tool was placed in their hands with these LO and descriptors. Meanwhile, the new approach has generated some very excellent programmes, which could have never been created under the old system. • Surveys and interviews indicate a significant change in Polish university life within just three years.

Workshops on Vocational Education and Training

Key success factors:

- Involving stakeholders, in particular the labour market, at all stages; both at policy and provider level (e.g. to support the updating of teachers' professional knowledge). Also, their role should shift from purely consultative to a more active role.
  Having some kind of reference group for the labour market such as Sector Skills Councils or professional organisations.

- Feedback loops (short) to improve and review learning outcomes.

- Assessment: including labour market representatives to the pool of examiners could be another dimension to secure the quality of the process.

- The availability of vocational standards that serve as a base for learning outcomes.

- The use of peer-review mechanisms can act as an important pillar of quality assurance, although it is still not used very often in VET (as compared to HE).

- Support: Strong, professional and systematic support should be provided to VET providers while implementing the new curricula/adopting the LO approach.

- Quality of staff is critically important – teachers, assessors – and the training they receive for their work with learning outcomes.

- Permeability: building bridges towards other segments of education. These 'bridges' should always work in both directions and not just lead from VET to HE.

Key challenges:

- There are limits to learning outcomes which need to be kept in mind. LO will not prevent a qualification from becoming obsolete. It requires a process to make them accepted and efficient - this might be for a limited number of years only.

- The importance of a clear and common understanding of learning outcomes ('what it means to work with learning outcomes') among teachers, headmasters, providers, etc.

- Articulation of learning outcomes (communication): How do we communicate learning outcomes? How do we define learning outcomes? When drafting learning outcomes, one of the key challenges is to strike a balance between vagueness and too much detail.

- The assessment of learning outcomes is often challenging - some learning outcomes are just difficult to assess.

- Resistance of education and training to responding to changing economic demands.

- Resources: significant resources in terms of time and money are required. Avoiding time pressure.

- Bringing in the labour market actors in an efficient way

- Bringing more accountability to providers.

- Involvement of teachers: The introduction of the LO approach requires a change of mind-set among teachers and their commitment, which may sometimes be difficult to achieve for headmasters and school authorities. This requires support and assistance, but also time.

- Avoiding an increase in bureaucracy, in particular at provider level.

Workshops on Higher Education

Key success factors:

- It is essential to achieve coherence between intended learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes, i.e. what is actually achieved by learners. This includes defining and making explicit the intended LO and identifying what course units are required to support this process.

- One of the key success factors is to achieve good cooperation among the academic staff and to secure their commitment. This is considered particularly important, since initial resistance from academic staff has been reported in several cases.

- 'Sharing' of understanding of learning outcomes across actors in the sector.

- Developing quality assurance for continuous improvement.

- Learning outcomes as threshold statements represent 'minimum' standards. These can of course be enriched.

- Both external and internal QA systems should apply LO orientation; otherwise there is not enough 'pressure' to use learning outcomes.

- Legislation, which prescribes the use of the LO approach, can be a good starting point, but absolutely needs complementary bottom-up activity.

- Provide support (instructions, trainings) to people to prepare them for their new tasks. Promote a sense of 'ownership' for learning outcomes.

Key challenges:

- Achieving a 'culture' mind-set of quality assurance (rather than depending on external requirement to apply LO based quality assurance approaches.

- Students as customers and the increasing use by them of social media to communicate about the 'quality' of their programmes and institutions.

- Risk-based approach > making quality assurance more efficient by focussing on areas of greatest risk.

- Haste, legislation pressure and bureaucracy that surround this area.

- The assessment and validation of learning outcomes related to 'soft skills' and social competencies, such as critical thinking or emancipation, is considered particularly challenging. Not all soft skills, however, are equally difficult to assess, such as the ability to work in teams.

- Using data – disseminating data to parties that might find them useful.

Way ahead:

- The LO approach can give HE institutions the opportunity to make their programmes more attractive (cf. case study from Poland). Students can act as an incentive for HEIs, as a change factor, forcing them to not just use their old programmes and 'dress them in new clothes'.

- The LO approach can be used to increase students' commitment.

5   HOW CAN QUALITY ASSURANCE MAKE USE OF THE LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACH?

This topic was first discussed in two separate workshops – one with VET representatives, and one with HE representatives – and then the results presented to the others for discussion.

Key messages from this session:

- One of the most striking differences between VET and HE is that in VET, learning outcomes are generally not drafted by the providers themselves but by some higher authority, i.e. VET providers do not have much influence on the learning outcomes, but are responsible for their quality assurance.
  It is widely acknowledged that HE institutions have much more autonomy. Upon closer inspection, however, even HE does not have full autonomy in drafting their learning outcomes, in particular when programmes are related to certain regulated professions (but probably less so in the field of humanities, for instance).

  The aspect of employability may exert some pressure in HE towards creating programmes that are more narrowly defined.

- While peer review mechanisms are taken for granted in higher education, they are much less frequently used in vocational education and training. Peer review for continuous improvement in VET is considered potentially very useful.

- Quality assurance needs to go beyond the mere checking of minimum standards. Coherence, compatibility and consistency are major issues.

- The VET sector is organised in a very diverse way – there are marked differences across countries, sub-systems and different settings (e.g. school-based VET, apprenticeships, company-based training). In contrast to HE, the QA mechanisms in place thus tend to be heterogeneous.

- The assessment of LO related to soft skills or transversal skills is widely considered a major challenge. It is suggested as one potential area for cooperation between VET and HE.

- In contrast to HE, the pressure to carry out quality assurance in VET comes mostly from the national level. Only certain fields, when cross-national organisations set the standards, have more pressure for performance across countries.

- Principle of accountability of QA processes. Because of the Bologna process, HE requires demonstration of the effectiveness of whatever system is in place for quality assurance at the national level. We do not yet have such a principle in place for vocational education and training.

6   EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE TOOLS IN SUPPORT OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The final session started with introductory contributions on the current evaluation of EQAVET (input by Sophie Weisswange, DG EAC), the evaluation of the EQF (input by Anita Kremo, DG EAC) and the ongoing revision of the EHEA European Standards and Guidelines (input by Stefan Delplace, EURASHE).

Revision of the ESG (EHEA Standards and Guidelines for QA)

The revision of the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education is currently ongoing and is a joint exercise by seven different institutions, including EURASHE. The revised ESG is scheduled for adoption at the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan (Armenia) in 2015.

One major challenge is to guarantee the adaptability, i.e. to develop generic standards that will take us forward for a number of years. Since quality is highly contextual, the relatively large autonomy of HE institutions is an important aspect to consider.

The revised ESG, according to current plans, will include more references to LO, ECTS, national qualifications frameworks and the QF-EHEA.

Evaluation of EQAVET

The EQAVET Recommendation, adopted in 2009, stipulates that an evaluation report on the experience gained and on perspectives for the future should be presented after four years. This report is currently being prepared for transmission to the European Parliament and Council.

Preliminary results suggest that the EQAVET framework helped to develop a quality culture across Europe. The 'toolbox approach', which allows countries to freely choose which components to adopt, is considered as very interesting but does not allow for much transparency by comparing across systems. There is a need to look for more synergies with other European instruments, such as the EQF and ECVET, but also for more synergies with other sectors of education, such as general education, higher education and adult education. Also, work-based learning as well as non-formal and informal learning should receive more attention.

Evaluation of the EQF Recommendation

The EQF Recommendation, adopted in 2008, requires the European Commission to evaluate the EQF by 2013, and to report to the European Parliament and to the Council on the experience gained and the implications for the future, including the possible review and revision of the Recommendation. This report is expected to be published in December 2013. Preliminary results from the evaluation suggest that the LO approach could be made more explicit (i.e. less generic) within the Recommendation – for example, by rewriting the quality assurance principles or by adding guidance information.

The delegates were asked to reflect on the quality assurance principles listed in Annex III of the EQF Recommendation (Annex III of the EQF Recommendation: Common Principles for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training in the context of the European Qualifications Framework) and how or whether they could be improved or modified in view of what has been discussed at this PLA.

Key issues mentioned with respect to the QA principles in Annex III:

The following key issues were raised.

- These QA principles only focus on VET and HE; a reference to lifelong learning could be included.

- There is no reference to the 'learner'. Some consider this as an omission, because all these systems have the learner in common.

- Some questioned whether these QA principles should even be changed or rewritten and whether any change would actually lead to added value.

- As regards the suggestion of adding some guidance information to these QA principles, there have been different reactions. Some consider it more useful to keep the principles very general and at an overarching level and to keep principles and guidance apart.
  However, some mentioned that the principles are very 'commonplace' and require some sort of amplification. Some suggested to do this in the form of 'principles plus commentary' instead of 'principles and guidelines', also because the term 'guidelines' may have a different meaning in VET and in HE and might thus be confusing.

- Some suggested that a reference to these common principles could be included in the revision of the ESG (European Standards and Guidelines for QA in Higher Education); this could form part of the intended linkage between the systems.

- Further suggestions include:

  - make more explicit the use of learning outcomes, which is currently only tangentially mentioned;

  - include a reference to other transparency instruments, such as diploma supplements;

  - emphasise the aspect of independence of quality assurance;

  - refer to the world of work and employability; Feedback on this aspect has been mixed; some argue that the term 'stakeholder' will automatically include the labour market (at least in VET), while others see a conflict between too much focus on employability vs. personal development.

7   CLOSING REMARKS

This peer learning activity forms part of a series which focus on the various settings for learning outcomes (e.g. teaching and learning, assessment). Delegates are invited to submit suggestions for topics for further PLAs or studies. The next PLA (to be held in 2014) will focus on learning outcomes and recognition.

Further operational follow-up to the PLA may include:

- Comparative analysis of the use of learning outcomes and its quality assurance of qualifications that are awarded by universities (mainly at EQF level 5). In France, some of these are considered as HE qualifications, other VET, even though awarded by universities. It should be analysed how much the use of the learning outcomes approach and their quality assurance differs.

- Exchange of views on the use of learning outcomes for general and transversal competences and their quality assurance in VET and HE. This is a common challenge.

- Take into account comments above in the revision of the ESG, EQF annex III and EQAVET as appropriate.

On 21 and 22 November, a Cedefop conference on 'The shift to learning outcomes and its impact: taking stock of European policies and practices' was held. One of the topics discussed was the use of learning outcomes for governance. Information is available on the Cedefop website.

EASQ – European Area of Skills and Qualifications. Delegates are invited to participate in the public consultation which will be launched end of 2013/beginning of 2014. It will include an online debate as well as Eurobarometer interviews, and will be concluded with a conference mid-2014.

EURASHE will hold a 'Community of Practice Workshop on Learning Outcomes within the Professional Higher Education Context' on 13 December in Prague, CZ. Delegates of the PLA are invited to participate and continue cooperation and discussion between VET and HE.

ANNEX A – AGENDA

Increasing synergies between the implementation of the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance arrangements

Peer learning activity

28-29 November 2013, Leuven, Belgium

Venue: Leuven Institute for Ireland; Janseniusstraat 1, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

AGENDA

Thursday 2013-11-28

09.00 – 09.30 Registration and coffee

09.30 – 09.40 Welcome and Opening –

> Dana-Carmen Bachmann, head of unit, B2 Vocational training and adult education; Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig, DG EAC, European Commission,

> Bryan Maguire, member of Structural Reforms Working Group under the Bologna Process, head of qualifications, Quality and Qualifications Ireland

09.40 – 10.00. Introduction to the PLA: The implementation of the learning outcomes approach and its implications on quality assurance

> Presentation by Jens Bjornavold, Cedefop

10.00 – 11.00 First insights on how quality assurance systems address the learning outcomes approach in European countries

> Presentation of the outcomes of the study of the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) – "Learning Outcomes in External Quality Assurance Approaches" – Hannele Seppala, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, Finland

> Presentation of the outcomes of EQAVET mapping "Quality assurance procedures in the processes of certification, curricula setting, accreditation and training of trainers in European VET systems" –
> Sean Feerick, EQAVET Secretariat

> Discussion

11.00 – 11.10 Introduction to workshops

11.10 – 11.30 Coffee break

11.30 – 13.15 Quality assurance supporting the implementation of the learning outcomes: National case studies – vocational education and training (3 parallel workshops)

Each workshop in this session will discuss

- how quality assurance arrangements in VET support the implementation of the learning outcomes approach?

- what are the success factors of the various national approach?

- What are the challenges?

Workshop 1:
Case study presenter: Kati Lounema, FNBE, Finland,
Chair: George Kostakis, Cedefop
Workshop 2:
Case study presenter: Ron Creutzburg, ECABO, Netherlands;
Chair: Sophie Weisswange, DG EAC
Workshop 3:
Case study presenter: Aleksandra Grašič, Slovenia,
Chair: Carlo Scatoli, DG EAC

13.15 – 14.15 Lunch

14.15 – 16.00 Quality assurance supporting the implementation of the learning outcomes: National case studies – higher education (3 parallel workshops)

Each workshop in this session will discuss

- how quality assurance arrangements in HE support the implementation of the learning outcomes approach?

- what are the success factors of the various national approach?

- What are the challenges?

Workshop 1:
Case study presenter: Anna Prades, AQU Catalunya, Spain;
Chair: Mike Coles, external consultant
Workshop 2:
Case study presenter: Axel Aerden, NVAO, Netherlands;

Chair: Anita Kremo, DG EAC

Workshop 2:
Case study presenter: Ewa Chmielecka, Poland,

Chair: Margie Waters, DG EAC

16.00 – 16.20 Coffee break

16.20 - 17.20 What have we learnt from the various national approaches? Can common principles or practises be identified in the various sub-systems? (plenary) – facilitated by Mike Coles, external consultant

19.30 Dinner – Restaurant "Les Rodins"

Friday 2013-11-29

09.00 – 09.10 Introduction to day 2 - Mike Coles

09.10 – 10.40 How can quality assurance make use of the learning outcomes approach? Reflection on next steps – group discussions: Volker Gehmlich, University of Bremen, Germany; and George Kostakis, Cedefop; followed by plenary discussion

10.40 – 11.00 Coffee break

11.00 – 13.15 European quality assurance tools in support of national developments - (plenary with cabaret round tables)

Building on current evaluations of EQAVET and EQF and the ongoing revision of the EHEA European Standards and Guidelines, how can common QA principles be strengthened to improve and take on-board the learning outcomes approach?

Introductory contributions by Stefan Deplace, EURASHE, Sean Feerick, EQAVET Secretariat, Anita Kremo, DG EAC

Exchange of views on how the European quality assurance tools can ensure and improve the quality of the use of learning outcomes and how to ensure coordinated implementation of the tools at national level

Conclusions

13.30 – 15.00 Lunch