

# FORUM ON QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

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**Learning outcomes, credits and qualifications frameworks**

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# ABSTRACT:

## Learning outcomes, credits and qualifications frameworks

Learning outcomes and credits play an important role in relation to both national frameworks and the overarching Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The problem is that their application is complex and prone to misunderstanding. This talk seeks to clarify their respective functions and offer hope to the bemused. It will examine what learning outcomes can accomplish and where they can usefully be applied. It will link learning outcomes to credits and credit systems (ECTS) and probe how they can interact to promote the Bologna agenda. Finally, it will explore why international progress in the full application of ECTS has been hard and why embracing learning outcomes is also challenging, particularly in the context of proliferating qualifications frameworks.

# LES OUTILS DE JARDIN / GARDEN TOOLS



Credits, learning outcomes  
and qualifications frameworks  
are just tools to improve our  
educational systems!

## LEARNING OUTCOMES DEFINITION

Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning. They are explicit statements about the outcomes of learning - the results of learning. They are usually defined in terms of a mixture of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and understanding that an individual will attain as a result of his or her successful engagement in a particular set of higher education experiences. In reality, they represent much more than this. They exemplify a particular methodological approach for the expression and description of the curriculum (modules, units and qualifications) and levels, cycles, subject benchmark statements and the 'new style' Bologna qualifications frameworks.



# TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AND THEIR MULTIPLE APPLICATIONS

MODE AND AREA OF APPLICATION	FEATURES AND ATTRIBUTES
<p><b>MODULE:</b> (learning outcomes employed at the level of the unit or module as statements that identify what a successful learner will be able to know, understand and / or be able to do)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerned with the achievements of the learner.</li> <li>• Differ from 'aims' that indicate the intentions of the teacher.</li> <li>• Directly link to a teaching strategy for the effective delivery of the learning outcomes.</li> <li>• Directly link to an assessment strategy and appropriate assessment criteria.</li> <li>• Are developed in a context of a wide range of internal and external reference points and influences.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ASSESSMENT AND GRADING CRITERIA</b> (at the level of the module, learning outcomes can be used to express the criteria that establish the standard of achievement and the relative performance of individuals )</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment criteria are the description of what the learner is expected to do to demonstrate that the learning outcome has been achieved. These are normally written at threshold level and distinguish the pass and fail threshold.</li> <li>• Grading criteria refer to the precise quality of the achievement of the outcome. They distinguish the relative performance of each student. Grading criteria are also written as learning outcomes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS</b> (learning outcomes used for describing and expressing individual subject-specific qualifications validated / accredited by a Higher Education Institution)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written individually or collectively by academics and are unique to a specific qualification and institution.</li> <li>• Include subject specific statements of skills, abilities and understanding.</li> <li>• Can include general transferable / transversal skills that are sought by employers.</li> <li>• Will be created within the context of the appropriate national and / or international 'external reference points' and qualifications frameworks.</li> </ul>

<p><b>NATIONAL QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS</b>  (learning outcomes as generic descriptions of types of qualifications)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exemplify the generic (non-subject specific) outcomes of a nationally recognised qualification</li> <li>• Produced by appropriate national authorities.</li> <li>• Will include statements of the wider abilities of a typical holder of the qualification (transferable / transversal skills).</li> <li>• Linked to national level descriptors. A generic qualifications descriptor can encompass several national level descriptors to show progression or just typify one level.</li> <li>• Generally describe the learning achieved by a student at the finish of a qualification (as do the international 'Dublin Descriptors').</li> <li>• Act as an external reference point, for those at the institutional level, developing individual qualifications.</li> </ul>
<p><b>NATIONAL SUBJECT BENCHMARK STATEMENTS</b>  (learning outcomes employed as statements designed to make explicit the general subject-specific academic characteristics and standards of programmes in the UK)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject.</li> <li>• These have been extensively developed in the UK by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).</li> <li>• They function as subject-specific external reference points for curriculum designers.</li> <li>• Internationally, the Tuning project explores the significance of subject-specific and general competences. It has encouraged detailed reflection on subject specific learning outcomes associated with the first and second Bologna cycles.</li> </ul>

## **NATIONAL LEVEL DESCRIPTORS**

(Learning outcomes employed as generic statements that describe the characteristics and context of learning)

- Designed to provide a shared understanding of each level and to facilitate the comparisons to be made between qualifications and learning at each level. A qualification will often straddle several levels.
- The number and complexity of national level descriptors is a matter of national decision. They are often expressed in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, practical applied skills, learner autonomy etc.
- They can be expressed in terms of what the best student might achieve (aspiration) or minimum standards (threshold) or something in between.
- Act as an external reference point for those developing individual qualifications as well as modules and units.

## **CYCLE DESCRIPTORS**

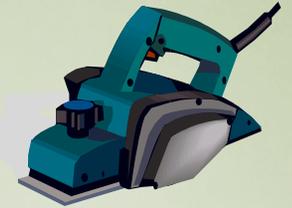
(Also known as the 'Dublin descriptors' describe the three cycles of the Bologna overarching qualifications framework in terms of learning outcomes)

- Adopted by the 45 Bologna Process countries and used to express the three cycles of the '*framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*'.
- Are composed of generic statements of the typical expectations of achievement and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle.
- Function as meta-level international descriptors (guidance tools) that act as an external reference point for those developing 'new style' national qualifications frameworks and national levels descriptors.

Learning outcomes are the basic building blocks of the Bologna education reforms:



# LEARNING OUTCOMES AID EDUCATIONAL REFORM



## LEARNING OUTCOMES CAN:

- Contribute to student-centred learning (focus on the learner not the teacher);
- Overcome some problems associated with traditional input-focused ways of expressing the curriculum;
- Have a positive impact on the teaching-learning-assessment relationship and thus benefit the curriculum design (module + course);
- Aid quality assurance and standards (way to express external reference points);
- Benefit learners and employers - focus on progression, skills and knowledge;
- Can (with credits) provide a 'common currency' that links vocational education, training and academic education that facilitates integrated lifelong learning educational frameworks;
- Helps national and international progression, transparency and recognition;
- Are intimately linked to all Bologna Action Lines.

# CREDITS

- Credits are a very useful tool but are also a source of controversy.
- There are problems associated with:
  - Definition, understanding and application.
  - Differences and confusions between overarching credit frameworks (meta-frameworks), national or local credit schemes. These relationships need clarification.
  - Proliferation of different national credit practices that could lead to confusion.
  - The relationships between ECTS and ECVET + EQF and FEHEA.
- Progress with the development and application of ECTS has been relatively slow.
- The relationship between credits and qualifications frameworks requires clarification.



## SOME DEFINITIONS (controversial?)

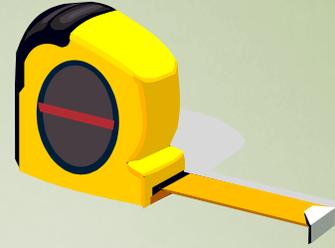
### CREDIT:

A quantified means of expressing the volume of learning based on the learning outcomes (associated with workload) achieved by an individual learner at a specified level, linked to an appropriate national and international level/cycle descriptor.

### EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER AND ACCUMULATION SYSTEM (ECTS):

A meta-credit system that is designed to improve international transparency, recognition and mobility by linking comprehensive national and local credit systems. ECTS does not replace national or local credit systems but augments them by providing a series of overarching reference points to ensure mutual compatibility.

## WHAT CAN CREDITS AND CREDIT SYSTEMS HELP TO ACHIEVE?



- Improved access + social inclusion;
- Improved mobility (institutional, national and international via the 'transfer' and 'accumulation' functions);
- Improved recognition (institutional, national and international);
- Enhanced choice for the learner;
- Increased flexibility - multiple entry + exit points;
- Aid progression (links to levels + cycles);
- Facilitate comparability - linking disparate learning opportunities undertaken in different contexts (part-time, vocational, academic, informal + non-formal, work-based learning, etc);
- Improved curriculum and qualifications (modular), e.g. interdisciplinary opportunities + joint degrees;
- Enhanced transparency by acting as an agreed academic currency.

NB. the detailed applications of credits (rules and regulations) is determined at the national, regional and local levels

**TABLE 3: STAGE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF ECTS**

<p><b>Dark Green (27)</b></p>	<p><u>Twenty-seven</u> countries in 2007 - ECTS credits are allocated in all first and second cycle programmes, enabling credit transfer and accumulation.</p>
<p><b>Light Green (9)</b></p>	<p><u>Nine countries</u> in 2007 - credits are allocated in at least 75 per cent of the first and second cycle Higher Education programmes, using ECTS OR a fully compatible credit system enabling credit transfer and accumulation</p>
<p><b>Yellow (6)</b></p>	<p><u>Six countries</u> in 2007- credits are allocated in 50-74 per cent of Higher Education programmes, using ECTS or a fully compatible national credit system enabling credit transfer and accumulation</p>
<p><b>Orange (6)</b></p>	<p><u>Six countries</u> in 2007 - ECTS credits are allocated in less than 50 per cent of Higher Education programmes .....OR A national credit system is used which is not fully compatible with ECTS .....OR ECTS is used in all programmes but only for credit transfer</p>
<p><b>Red (0)</b></p>	<p><u>Zero countries</u> – had no credit system in place yet</p>

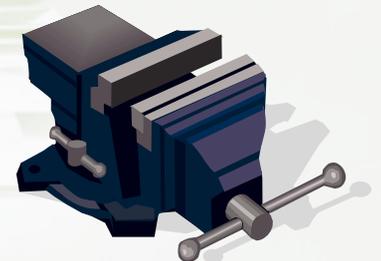
## ECTS OBSERVATIONS:

- The role of credits and their relationship to qualifications frameworks is an area of concern and potential confusion + slow progress.
- The EUA '*Trends V*' and EISB '*BTSE*' reports indicate problems with ECTS (theory v practice).
- ECTS issues include:
  - Definition of credit + links to learning outcomes + workload
  - Relationship between ECTS and ECVET
  - Distinctions between credit accumulation and transfer modes
  - Role as a meta-framework and relationship to national/local credit systems.
- Credits have a complex and significant role in facilitating recognition, flexible learning pathways, curriculum reform, mobility, lifelong learning , etc.



## QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

- Learning outcomes and credits are academic tools that complement each other.
- They naturally fit with qualifications frameworks to help contribute to a range of the Bologna objectives.
- 'New style' National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) and the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher education Area (EHEA) are committed to employing both credits and learning outcomes.
- Learning outcomes and credits are not the universal panacea for all educational problems facing higher education and they certainly create distinct challenges that should not be underestimated. However, it is arguable that it might not be possible to have a meaningful European Higher Education Area without their widespread and consistent use.



## FINAL THOUGHTS



- We need a:
  - Better understanding of the new educational Bologna infrastructure - the dynamic + interlocking fit between QA, QF, external reference points, learning outcomes, credits, cycles, qualifications descriptors - all part of a new European educational paradigm (**shift from horses to tractors!**);
  - Common definition and understanding of credits and learning outcomes;
  - Better understanding of the relationship between the meta-credit framework (ECTS) and national/local credit systems (which tools work where);
  - Detailed and updated ECTS Users' Guide (forthcoming);
  - Clarification of relationships between credits, learning outcomes, levels and cycles, ECVET, ECTS, EQF and FHEA;
  - Common understanding of learning outcomes and their multiple applications and how countries are using them (including the technical side of their application as, e.g. written as minimum threshold statements or, what a 'best' or 'average' student will achieve);
- We must not forget that credits, learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks are just tools to help us and if we fail to use them correctly we will end up with...

SOMETHING  
USELESS +  
NOT FIT FOR  
PURPOSE!

Apologies to Man Ray, Daring Gift  
(Cadeau Audace), 1921/1974.  
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