



ASEAN QUALIFICATIONS REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

Concept Note No. 2— Learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks



one vision
one identity
one community

This concept note¹ is the second in the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Series. This note documents the agreed understanding of the AMS in relation to learning outcomes and their role in qualifications frameworks.

Learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks

Globally, there has been a shift to learning outcomes as the basis of NQFs and regional common reference frameworks. This shift to a 'learning outcomes' approach moves the emphasis from the duration of learning to the actual learning and the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through the learning process. As such learning outcomes emphasise 'the results of learning rather than focusing on inputs such as length of study',² and support the transfer of qualifications, including credit transfer and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The AQRF aims to use learning outcomes to facilitate comparisons of and links between qualifications and qualifications systems across AMS. The AQRF reinforces that to facilitate the linking of NQF levels against the levels in the AQRF, NQFs or qualifications systems should have qualifications 'demonstrably based on learning outcomes'. For NQFs that are not based on learning outcomes, the AQRF requires that the referencing process and report should demonstrate progress towards a learning outcomes based approach.

Learning outcomes are used to explain standards, to motivate people, to improve assessment and to report learning. Qualifications frameworks play an important role in making this happen.

The concept of learning outcomes is at first glance a simple one – it is about what someone knows and can do. In other words it is a statement about what someone has learned. Some people say the way the person has learned is not important, however some say that is does. There are two main arguments for this latter point of view: the first is that it is not possible to capture all kinds of learning in simple learning outcome statements and that this undermines the natural way knowledge has developed over the centuries. The second argument is that the context of learning is important – both in facilitating learning and demonstrating learning. For example in apprenticeship training the time spent being immersed in a working environment is an important attribute and adds value to the demonstrated learning outcomes.

These arguments against the exclusive use of learning outcomes are powerful and in most situations both outcomes and input measures are considered. For example:

- Programme specifications can be supplemented with outcome information (e.g. Bologna process)
- Competency based systems can be supplemented with input information (e.g. duration of apprenticeship programmes)
- Assessment/evaluation methods can use inputs (completion of programmes) and outcomes (objective/external assessment/evaluation)
- Recruitment processes use both input (the time someone has worked with reputable employers) and outcome information (qualifications, proof of competence).

¹ Draft prepared by Mike Coles and Andrea Bateman (2015) with support from ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA Economic Cooperation Support Programme (AECSP).

² European Communities (EC) (2008). The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), Belgium.

Learning is defined in terms of its outcomes and are applied in different contexts and for different purposes. So what is the difference between a learning outcome and a competency? A learning outcome may not specify the context in which it is demonstrated. If it does specify the context, and is assessed in that context, then it can be considered a competency. The difference is important because the context of demonstrating learning is inextricably linked to the concept of competency. The complexity of the context has a direct influence on the ability to demonstrate competence, for example you may have learned to play football with friends and family but if you are asked to show that you can play when faced by a professional football team you may find it difficult.

So the simple concept of learning outcomes is more complex when it is applied. People see learning outcomes in different ways, for example some see learning outcomes as behaviours, attitude, productivity, outputs, pay, efficiency, personal development, job/career progression and a person's potential. Others see results of assessment, examination, testing, coursework and measurement of progress as learning outcomes. People in different settings see learning outcomes differently, for example learning providers see learning outcomes in the form of programme objectives, curricula and assessment standards whilst employers see learning outcomes as occupational standards, job competencies. For all these differences the use of learning outcomes has a common theme – the focus shifts from inputs (what has to be taught, what has to be learned, what has to be done) to outcomes (what has been learned, what has been made or carried out). This shift holds the key to the added value of learning outcomes as a tool for clarity of purpose in all settings (education, work and in life in general).

But none of this undermines the value of learning outcomes. The current international trend towards greater use of learning outcomes in education is testimony to this value, for example, firstly learning outcomes are increasingly used in describing curricula, qualifications specifications, assessment processes and in NQF levels. A second area of value is in the work setting, for example use of learning outcomes in occupational standards, job profiles, and recruitment and appraisal schemes. Learning outcomes are valued in guidance settings for example in writing course details, job search details and job adverts. Last and not least learning outcomes are valued in the personal context, for example in writing CVs and describing job experience.

In all these ways learning outcomes bring transparency – this is the main advantage of using learning outcomes. The goals of the learning are clearer, the expected outcomes of assessment are clearer and people are able to understand better how to plan their learning careers. Use of learning outcomes also makes assuring the quality of learning and assessment more effective. However all these strong arguments in favour of learning outcomes are not the focus of this paper.

In the implementation of a learning outcomes approach there are many levels, ranging from the micro learner focussed level to the macro international level. The most effective approaches include both the micro and macro levels and operates 'top down' and 'bottom up' at the same time.

But what are the macro levels? What kinds of tools and instruments are effective in encouraging the greater use of learning outcomes? Amongst these macro approaches are legal instruments, trade agreements, international standards for goods and services and of course regional and national policies. Featuring in many of these macro approaches are standards or benchmarks of learning and these are often captured in qualifications levels

and qualifications frameworks. How qualifications frameworks support learning outcomes is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Qualifications frameworks

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are now a global phenomenon; from their early development in France and a few Anglophone countries almost two thirds of the countries in the world are using or implementing qualifications frameworks. The first frameworks were developed to address specific challenges for linking, regulating or developing qualifications. A second generation of frameworks (from about 2000) are mainly concerned with improving quality and transparency in qualifications systems. In the last five years there has been a large expansion in the creation of NQFs that aim to link qualifications within and between countries. The majority of countries developing national qualifications frameworks today are also involved in regional frameworks (RQFs) such as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf).

Frameworks have been seen as important as countries have tried to respond to a range of social, technical and economic pressures that have acted on education and training systems and on qualification arrangements in particular. It is also possible that global changes have encouraged countries to look outward when reforming qualifications systems rather than considering them a purely national matter and immune from international influences. Examples of such influences are the growth of international business, the free flow of electronic information and the increased migration of people from one country to another. Another example is the expansion in the number of international qualifications and the availability of on-line educational resources. Thus there is now a greater awareness of the need for qualifications systems to be more outward looking as governments acknowledge the need for qualifications to play a part in facilitating competitive production and economic growth. At the same time international companies and international organisations, including owners of international qualifications, are increasingly asking for transparency in the national systems so that transnational business can be facilitated through recruitment of employees with appropriate qualifications.

What is also new about the most recent NQFs is the interest of governments in developing them for a range of purposes that go beyond basic classification. Modern NQFs can justifiably be described as 'instruments with a vision' questioning current education and training practises and challenging existing professional and sectoral interests. Designing a NQF is thus something more than agreeing on a set of technical features and they demand attention to be paid to political, social and cultural implications that require full stakeholder involvement.

NQFs are undoubtedly powerful change agents but they are, at their simplest, classifications of qualifications according to their demand on the learner. The classification is made using level descriptors that cover the important aspects of qualifications, For example knowledge is a key domain of learning for a qualification and knowledge (pure and applied) is a part of all qualifications frameworks, other domains include skills, autonomy, responsibility, attitudes. Each country determines the important domains for itself. A descriptor for level 3 qualifications in England follows as an illustration of these domains and how they are expressed.

Figure 1: An example of level descriptors for a Level 3

Level	Summary	Knowledge and understanding	Application and action	Application and action
Level 3	Achievement at level 3 reflects the ability to identify and use relevant understanding, methods and skills to complete tasks and address problems that, while well defined, have a measure of complexity. It includes taking responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures as well as exercising autonomy and judgement within limited parameters. It also reflects awareness of different perspectives or approaches within an area of study or work.	<p>Use factual, procedural and theoretical understanding to complete tasks and address problems that, while well defined, may be complex and non-routine</p> <p>Interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas</p> <p>Be aware of the nature of the area of study or work</p>	<p>Have awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work</p> <p>Address problems that, while well defined, may be complex and non-routine</p> <p>Identify, select and use appropriate skills, methods and procedures</p> <p>Use appropriate investigation to inform actions</p> <p>Review how effective methods and actions have been</p>	<p>Take responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures, including, where relevant, responsibility for supervising or guiding others</p> <p>Exercise autonomy and judgement within limited parameters</p>

Frameworks use learning outcomes

All of the level descriptor statements are expressed as learning outcomes and this is now the way almost all descriptors of all qualifications frameworks are written. This is a key part of the architecture of a framework and it allows it to do the job of classifying, recognising and bringing transparency to a qualifications system. The effects of an NQF can be powerful and it is not easy to distinguish whether it is the sequence of levels of NQF or the learning outcomes-based descriptors as the source this power. It is best to see these two aspects of NQFs as being complementary with each supporting the other in its work.

Frameworks supporting the use of learning outcomes

Qualifications frameworks support the use of learning outcomes to make standards clear, improve transparency of assessment and qualifications and in reporting learning so that it can be recognised. How do qualifications framework support the wider use of learning outcomes?

Firstly NQFs are reference points for main qualifications in a country. The simple fact that NQF levels are expressed as learning outcomes is a signal that it is better if qualifications are

themselves expressed as outcomes. Sometimes the NQFs have rules or criteria about how qualifications can be allocated to levels – these rules will often state that the qualification should be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. Whether the qualification is allocated a level voluntarily or through the use of criteria the NQF is acting as a catalyst for the use of learning outcomes. All the NQFs developed in Europe since the advent of the EQF have used level descriptors in the form of learning outcomes. Hungary has recently developed an NQF that is seen as particularly important way to draw all stakeholder groups towards a more common understanding of the ways learning outcomes can be written and used in the different education, training and work settings.

Secondly assessment of a learner's achievement for a qualification in a framework can also use learning outcomes usually expressed as assessment criteria. The use of these assessment criteria is also encouraged by NQFs and this can be a particularly strong force for change. For example most qualifications in the UK are written as units of assessment that can be combined into full qualifications. In most ASEAN countries, in the vocational and education training sector, units of competency also take a similar form and combinations of these also make up a qualification. This is to facilitate a credit accumulation and transfer system. The full qualification specifies the learning outcomes that it represents, however these are written in quite general ways. The learning outcomes in the units of assessment are written in a much more specific way. However these learning outcomes are still difficult to assess and so more detailed assessment criteria are written. These can be assessed and provide evidence of learning for the units which in turn provide evidence that the learning outcomes for the full qualification have been met.

Thirdly the sectors that have an interest in education and training are usually involved in the design and management of a NQF. They work towards having the NQF reflect their sectoral interests and they want to show the relevance of NQF for qualifications in their sector. Thus they are encouraged to use the NQF language of learning outcomes to express the relationship. The EQF referencing process has encouraged sectors to express learning levels and qualifications as learning outcomes. In Poland the NQF describes levels of qualification/learning in necessarily general terms and the sectors (general education, higher education and VET) interpret these general level descriptors in more specific ways that are more understandable in their sector. There is no intention of changing the nature of a qualification level but simply to make it more understandable within the education sector. In turn, in the VET sector for example, the specific craft areas can make a further set of more specific level descriptors that are understandable within the craft area. Once again keeping consistency of levels of qualification that is described in the NQF descriptors. Thus the NQF encourages the sectors to make explicit use of learning outcomes the qualification requirements in specific parts of the education and training system.

A fourth example of how NQFs encourage the use of learning outcomes concerns bridging the labour market and education and training provision. This is a common aim of NQFs. National bodies representing economic sectors develop strategies for the workforce development in their sector and are involved in the definition of occupational standards or qualifications. These occupational standards (which are learning outcomes) reflect the requirements for specific types of occupations and are often an input into development of vocational qualifications. The existence of strong sectoral bodies that are representative for their sector and competent in analysing the labour market needs strengthens the trust in the relevance of qualifications. In Australia, New Zealand, Germany and Austria learning outcomes have been determined by sectoral bodies for many years, they usually refer to competence requirements for positions in the main crafts. Learning these specific work

based competencies is combined with general learning outcomes to create a qualification that can be accommodated in the NQF. In fact the NQFs confirm the centrality of this national way of developing VET programmes and qualifications.

Meta frameworks and learning outcomes

Meta frameworks such as the AQRF also have a strong influence on the use of learning outcomes in education and training. The process of referencing an NQF to the AQRF, the quality assurance of the process of referencing and the influence on learning programmes are examples of the ways regional frameworks such as the AQRF can influence NQFs and the curricula, assessment and qualifications that underpin them.

Referencing

By defining the levels in learning outcomes (level descriptors) in the EQF, countries are required in the process of referencing to explain the levels in their NQFs or qualifications systems in terms of learning outcomes. In turn the qualifications that are included in each level will also need to be explained in terms of learning outcomes. Thus the process of referencing to the EQF is a stimulus to countries to further develop the scope of learning outcomes in the whole qualification system. Most of the EQF referencing reports produced to date show the prominence of learning outcomes.

How frameworks support better quality assurance

The processes by which countries promote consistency and quality within assessment and qualifications are supported well through the use of learning outcomes. The AQRF encourages quality assurance processes that are based on learning outcomes. These outcomes based approaches, for example defining the standards on which assessment are based (assessment criteria) bring better quality assessments and consistency and reliability into the qualifications systems.

Influencing learning programmes

By defining programmes in terms of learning outcomes, learners, teachers and assessors can be more certain of what is expected of them. In time the AQRF levels can support the NQFs to make the learning demands of programmes (the standard expected) more consistent. It will also encourage NQFs to make it possible for more flexible learning pathways to develop so that learners carry forward the learning they have achieved on one programme to another programme (credit). These learning outcomes based programmes will also make it possible for people who are learning outside the formal education and training system (non formal and informal learning) to carry their learning into formal qualifications and make it visible.

A powerful top down influence

By encouraging the greater use of learning outcomes through the referencing process, the AQRF can act as a top-level reference point for policies that aim to further develop the use of learning outcomes. The more immediate driver for expanding the use of learning outcomes comes from arrangements in countries, for example through NQFs, through national quality assurance processes, through teacher training, through projects and through developing platforms and tools that require the use of learning outcomes.

In summary

The simple idea of learning outcomes becomes more complex when it is used in practice. However, combined with some regularly used and trusted input measures, learning outcomes can enhance curricula, qualifications and NQFs. Learning outcomes can help in work and for providing guidance for individuals. Learning outcomes bring transparency to these contexts.

Qualifications frameworks that are based on learning outcomes are becoming more common and these new tools are a strong influence on other aspects of the education and training system including work based elements and guidance for the learning careers of citizens.