

# State of the art on learning outcomes

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## **1 Introduction**

This report is the result of a survey among the member organisations of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA). The main goal of this survey was to update the survey results of 2006. These results were published by OQA as “State-of-the-art on Learning Outcomes of Some European Agencies”.

The survey made in 2006 by OQA was considered the starting point of the survey of 2009. The main differences consists in the fact that the survey of 2009 used as many closed questions as possible and started with a presentation of a clear and generally accepted definition of learning outcomes.

The aim of the survey of 2009 was to gather an overview that would be useful and necessary in preparing and developing a set of principles for assessing Learning Outcomes. The survey therefore covered the use of learning outcomes in relation to the assessment and accreditation procedures and how links are made with (national) qualifications frameworks.

## 2 Executive summary

From the first part of the results we learn that the definition for learning outcomes used by *all* the accreditation agencies is in line with the definition of learning outcomes as included in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area<sup>1</sup>. And although four of the nine countries included in the survey do not have a national qualifications framework covering higher education, learning outcomes are or will be used by all the higher education institutions that undergo accreditation procedures. The four countries that do not have a national qualifications framework *in use* yet (Austria, Spain, Poland and Switzerland) are in the development phase and are thus on their way of having such a framework soon.

In *almost all* countries where a national qualifications framework is in use, there is an explicit or legal link between the learning outcomes in the higher education system and the national qualifications framework (seven out of the nine). The same result was found regarding an explicit or legal link between the national qualifications framework and the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA as well (seven out of the nine).

The second part of the survey covered the responsibilities regarding learning outcomes.

In a *large majority* of countries, both the higher education institutions and the national authorities are responsible for drawing up of generic learning outcomes, i.e. outcomes that refer to the level or cycle of a programme. In *half* of the countries concerned stakeholders and quality assurance agencies are also involved.

When talking about subject-/discipline-specific learning outcomes, national authorities are not involved at all though in most of them they participate in the definition of the subject-specific learning outcomes towards regulated professions. In six countries the design of subject-specific learning outcomes is or will be mainly based on international benchmarking.

The third part of the survey covered learning outcomes and external quality assurance.

The focus of the accreditation procedures in most countries is still the programme. Some of the countries focus on both the programme and the institution but in separate procedures. In all the countries concerned learning outcomes are taken into account during the external quality assurance procedure. The majority of the countries seem to be in the development phase of external evaluation procedures concerning learning outcomes. Only three quality assurance agencies answer that their external evaluation procedures regarding learning outcomes are fully developed (AAC, AHGPS and NVAO).

Most quality assurance agencies take learning outcomes into account when looking at the objectives of the programme (i.e. intended learning outcomes). A majority also takes learning outcomes into account when considering the learning assessment and the programme results (i.e. achieved learning outcomes).

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<sup>1</sup> learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning.

In the case of six quality assurance agencies the attention paid to learning outcomes in the external quality assurance procedures is focused both on the perspective to stimulate the use of learning outcomes and on the actual assessment of the learning outcomes.

### **3 Methodology.**

Working Group 4 of ECA took the initiative to develop a set of principles for assessing learning outcomes. This set of principles would have to be presented to the ECA member organisations and in order to be accepted by the whole of ECA the principles would need a strong basis in the current activities of the member organisations. WG 4 therefore decided to use an online survey to gather an overview that would be useful and necessary in preparing and developing a set of principles for assessment concerning learning outcomes.

The working group first discussed the survey and the possible questions in their meeting in Brussels in October 2008. For their next meeting in Madrid in January 2008 a draft of the survey was prepared. A new draft was made based on the discussions in Madrid and was circulated via e-mail. In this way, the survey questions were finalised.

The working group opted for closed questions (tick boxes) with the possibility to clarify answers were necessary. The intention was to increase the response rate by simplifying filling in the survey and to augment the comparability of the results.

The survey has been filled out by 13 accreditation agencies and the results of the survey cover nine countries. Only two agencies did not respond: NOKUT (due to personal reasons) and ZEvA (but GAC filled in the survey). Norway is therefore the only country not covered.

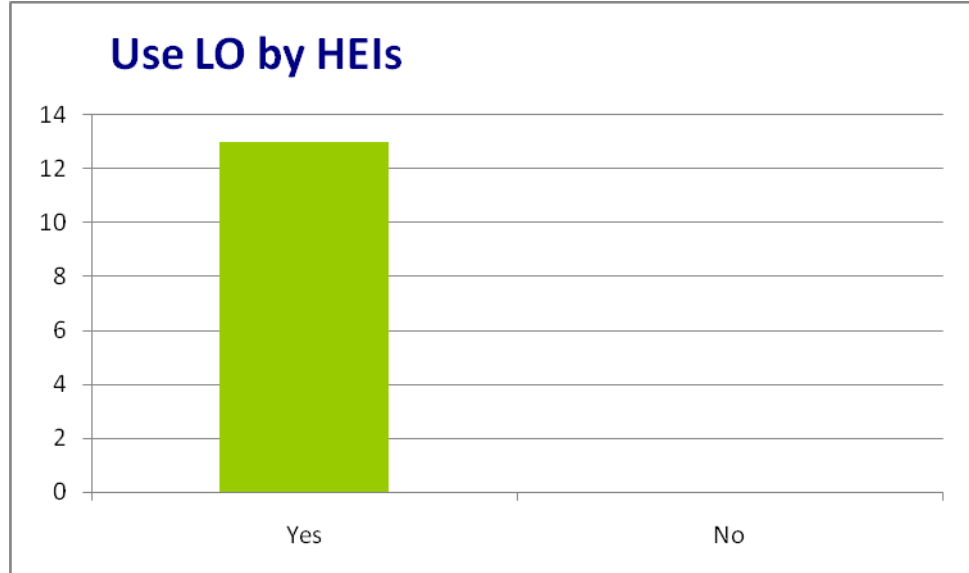
### **4 Results and discussion**

In this chapter the original question and answer options will be presented. Underneath the results are shown graphically and were necessary further explained. Cross-tabulations are presented where we found the results interesting. These cross-tabulations are not commented.

#### 4.1 Learning outcomes and the higher education system (Q. 1 - 5)

1. In general, learning outcomes are / will be used by the higher education institutions that undergo accreditation procedures in the country where you are mainly active.

Yes     No

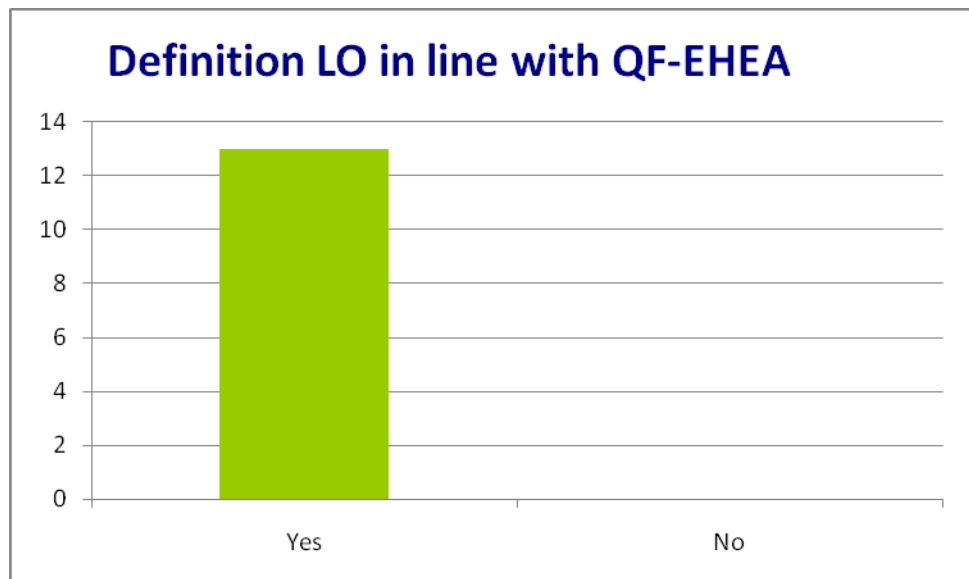


OAQ clarified that their yes meant that in general learning outcomes are used in the Swiss higher education system, but so far there is still quite some heterogeneity in the way learning outcomes are defined, used and measured.

2. Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning. (Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, p. 29; link on the bottom of this page)

The definition of learning outcomes in the higher education system where your agency is (mainly) active is / will be in line with this definition.

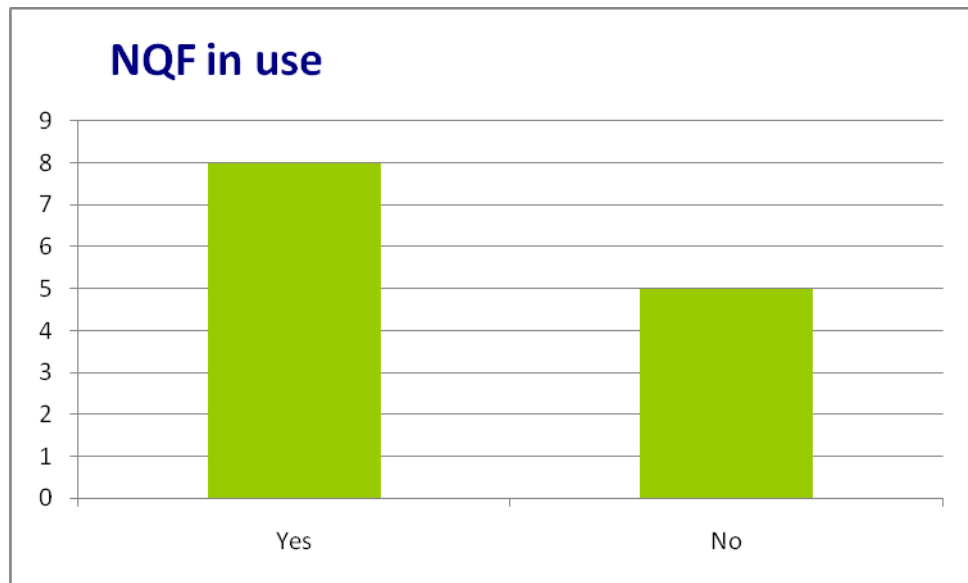
Yes     No



OAQ clarified that as far as the universities of applied sciences are concerned, the Directives for the accreditation (May 2007) make an explicit reference to the Dublin Descriptors. However, a definition of learning outcomes is not explicitly given or referred to. The link to the Dublin Descriptors allows assuming that learning outcomes are intended in line with the above mentioned definition.

3. Has the country where you are mainly active a national (higher education) qualifications framework in use?

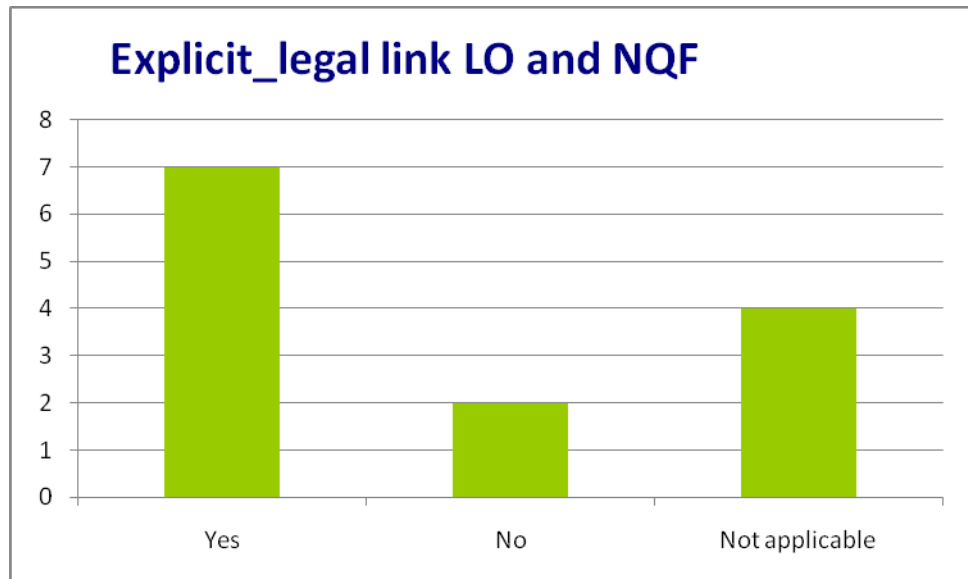
Yes     No



Accreditation agency	NQF in use	NQF not in use
AAC, Austria		X
AHGPS, Germany	X	
ANECA, Spain		X
AQAS, Germany	X	
ASIIN, Germany	X	
CTI, France	X	
EVA, Denmark	X	
FHR, Austria		X
FIBAA, Germany	X	
GAC, Germany	X	
NVAO, Netherlands/Flanders	X	
OAQ, Switzerland		X
PKA, Poland		X
ZEVA, Germany		

4. Is there an explicit or legal link between the learning outcomes in the higher education system and the national qualifications framework?

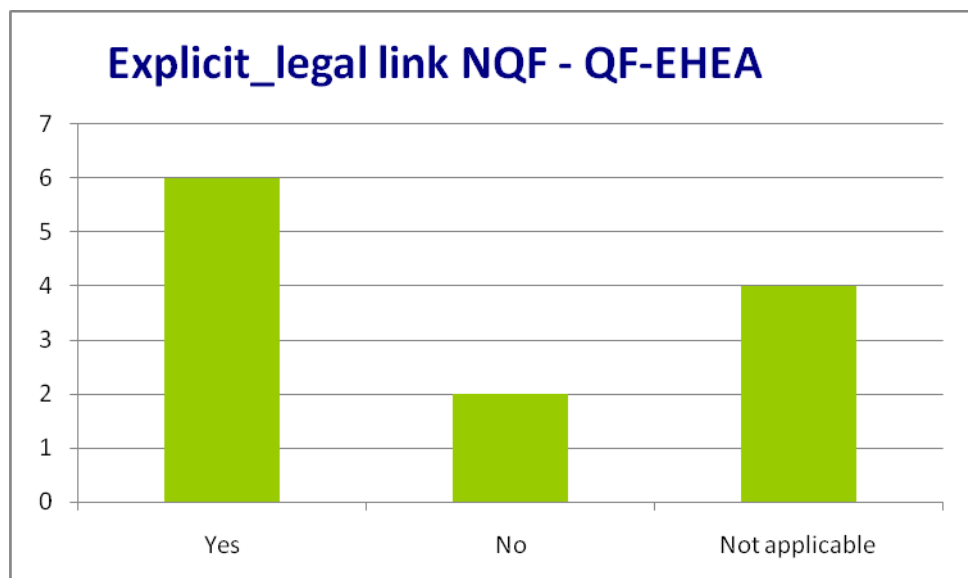
Yes     No     Not applicable



5. Is there an explicit or legal link between the national qualifications framework and the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA?

Yes     No     Not applicable

You can write an optional clarification regarding question 4 and 5 here.



ANECA, FHR, OAQ and PKA clarified that their National Qualification Framework are under development. CTI clarified that the correspondance between the RNCP (the French NQF for the whole of education) and the QF-EHEA and/or EQF is not clarified yet.

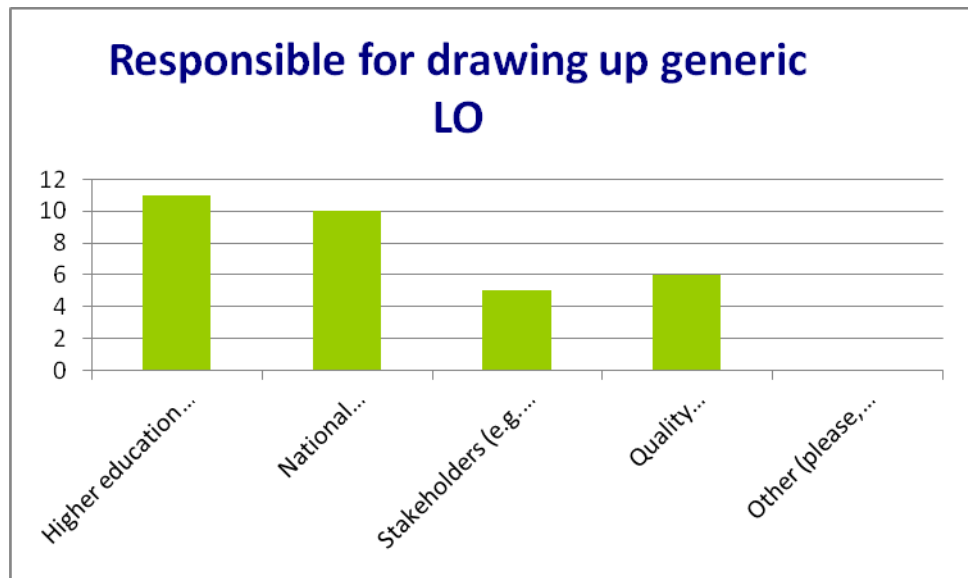
Absolute values	Explicit/legal link NQF - QF-EHEA		
	Yes	No	Not applicable
<b>Explicit/legal link LO and NQF</b>			
Yes	5	1	-
No	1	1	-
Not applicable	-	-	4

## 4.2 Responsibilities regarding learning outcomes (Q. 6-8)

6. Who are/will be responsible for drawing up the learning outcomes that refer to the level or cycle of a certain programme in your higher education system? (You can give more than one answer.)

- Higher education institutions
- National authorities (e.g. ministry)
- Stakeholders (e.g. professional field)
- Quality Assurance/Accreditation agency
- Other (please, clarify below)

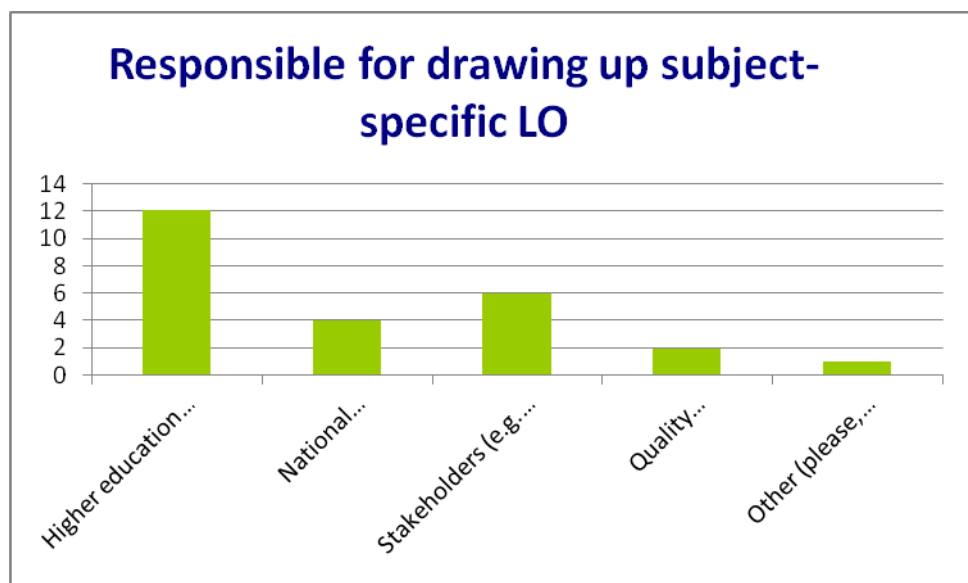
You can write your clarification here.



7. Who are/will be responsible for drawing up the learning outcomes that refer to the specific subject or discipline of a certain programme in your higher education system? (You can give more than one answer.)

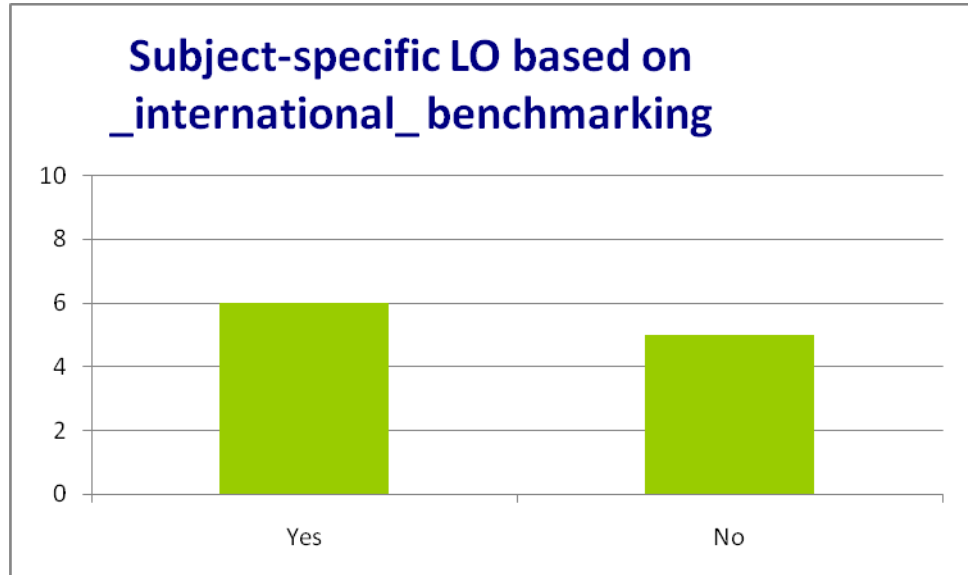
- Higher education institutions
- National authorities (e.g. ministry)
- Stakeholders (e.g. professional field)
- Quality Assurance/Accreditation agency
- Other (please, clarify below)

You can write your clarification here.



8. The learning outcomes that refer to the specific subject or discipline of a certain programme in your higher education system are /will be mainly based on an (international) benchmarking?

Yes     No

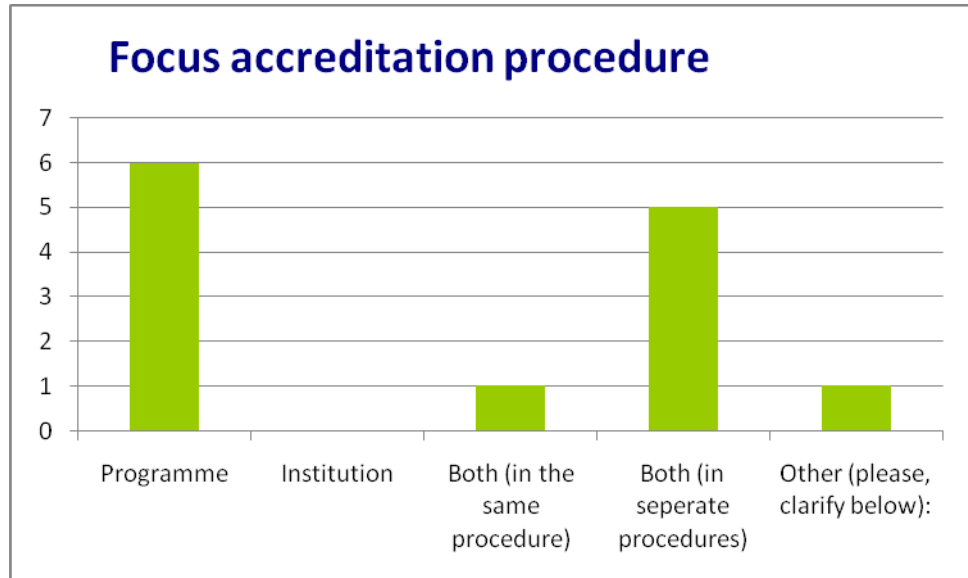


Accreditation agency	Yes	No
AAC, Austria		
AHGPS, Germany	X	
ANECA, Spain	X	
AQAS, Germany		X
ASIIN, Germany		
CTI, France	X	
EVA, Denmark		X
FHR, Austria		X
FIBAA, Germany	X	
GAC, Germany		X
NVAO, Netherlands/Flanders	X	
OAQ, Switzerland	X	
PKA, Poland		X
ZEvA, Germany		

### 4.3 learning outcomes and external quality assurance (Q. 9-13)

9. What is the focus of your accreditation procedures at this moment (2009)?

- Programme
- Institution
- Both (in the same procedure)
- Both (in separate procedures)
- Other (please, clarify below):



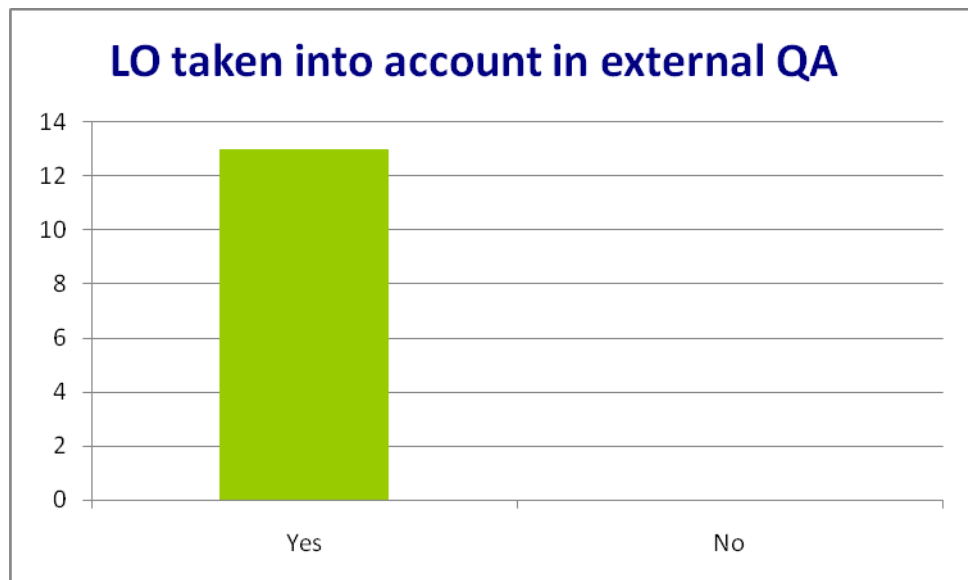
Accreditation agency	Programme	Institution	Both (in same procedure)	Both (separate procedures)	Other (clarify)
AAC, Austria			X		
AHGPS, Germany				X	
ANECA, Spain	X				
AQAS, Germany				X	
ASIIN, Germany				X	
CTI, France	X				
EVA, Denmark	X				
FHR, Austria	X				
FIBAA, Germany				X	
GAC, Germany					X
NVAO, Netherlands/Flanders	X				
OAQ, Switzerland				X	
PKA, Poland	X				
ZEva, Germany					

ANECA clarified that there are certain QA procedures that are focused on the institutional level (e.g. AUDIT procedures). CTI explained that the focus of their procedures is on the programmes but that their external evaluation also strongly takes into account the context of the institution. OAQ explained that the separate procedures also concern different types of institutions: institutional

assessments for universities and programme accreditation for the universities of applied sciences. GAC clarified their answer (“Other”) as follows: “a) Programme (Programme Accreditation) b) Internal Quality Assurance System of higher education institution (System Accreditation)”.

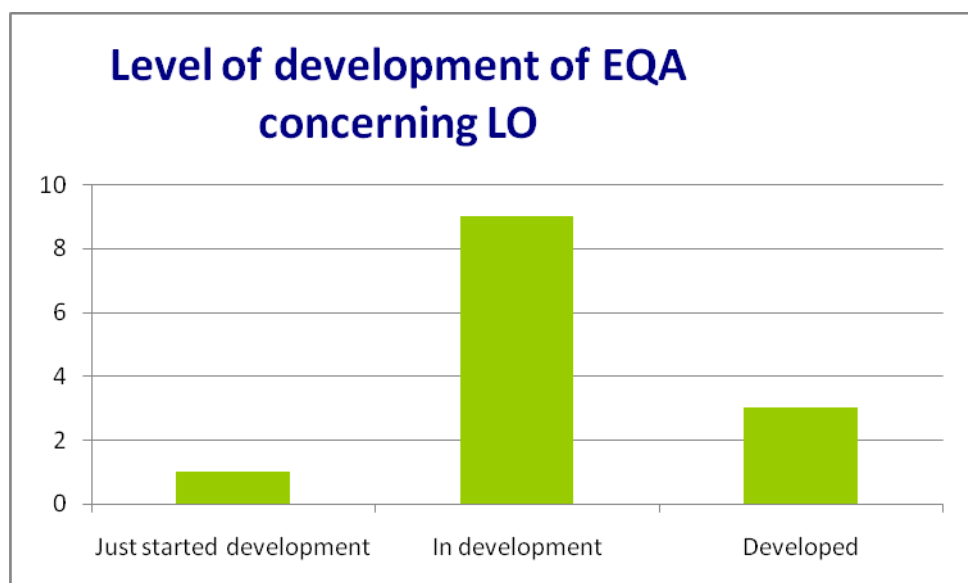
10. Are learning outcomes taken into account during an external quality assurance procedure?

- Yes     No



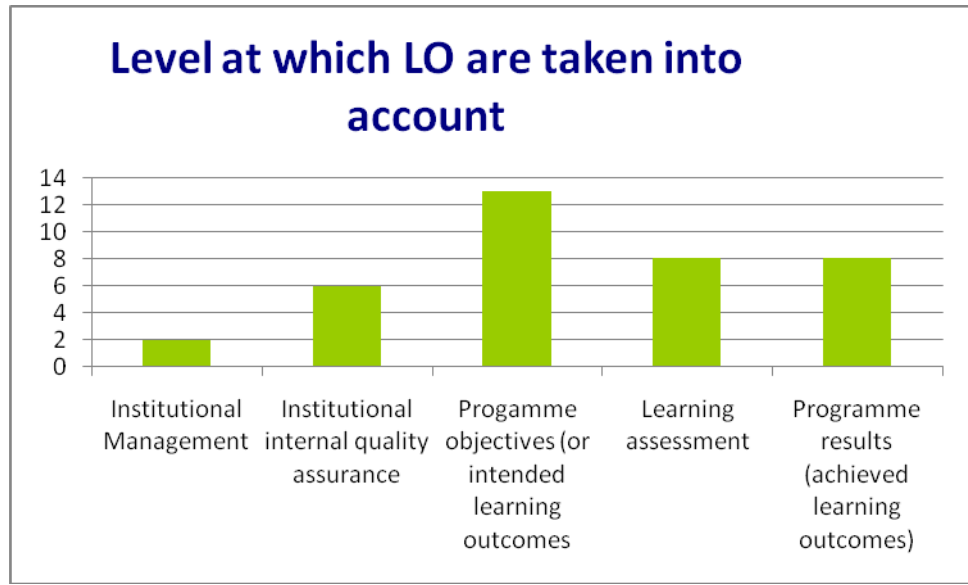
11. At what level of development are your external evaluation procedures concerning learning outcomes?

- Just started development  
 In development  
 Developed



12. At what level of your procedure are learning outcomes taken into account?

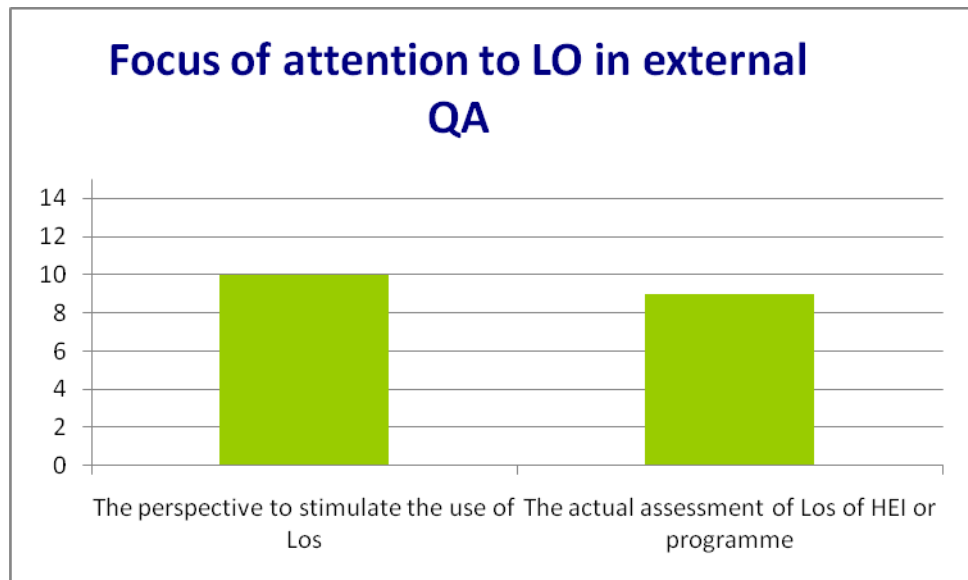
- Institutional Management
- Institutional internal quality assurance
- Programme objectives (or intended learning outcomes)
- Learning assessment
- Programme results (achieved learning outcomes)



13. The attention paid to learning outcomes in your external quality assurance procedures is/will be focused on:

(You can give more than one answer.)

- The perspective to stimulate the use of learning outcomes in HE
- The actual assessment of the learning outcomes of the HEI or the programme



Accreditation agency	To stimulate	To assess
AAC, Austria	X	
AHGPS, Germany	X	X
ANECA, Spain	X	X
AQAS, Germany	X	
ASIIN, Germany	X	X
CTI, France		X
EVA, Denmark	X	X
FHR, Austria	X	
FIBAA, Germany		X
GAC, Germany	X	X
NVAO, Netherlands/Flanders		X
OAQ, Switzerland	X	
PKA, Poland	X	X
ZEvA, Germany		

## 5 General discussion and concluding remarks

- **Learning outcomes and the higher education system (Q. 1 - 5)**

Q.1. All Quality Assurance agencies declare that LOS are used in their HE system in their country. This does not mean that the implementation of LOS is already sustainable and that the use of LOS is generally and systematically accepted

Q.2. All countries accept the definition of LOS as described in the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*, p. 29.

Q.3. 60 % of the countries have a NQF, the other countries are on their way.

Q.4. and Q.5. In those countries where a NQF is established, there is a legal link with both the overarching framework as with the LOS explicitly present.

### **5.1 Responsibilities regarding learning outcomes (Q. 6-8)**

Q.6. Development of the generic LOS is in most of the cases the responsibility of HEI and the local authorities. In 50 % of the cases , QA agencies are involved .

Q.7. and Q.8. Development of subject specific LOS is mostly the responsibility of the HEI (90%) and stakeholders (50%). Only in the cases of regulated professions, authorities are involved. In more than 50% of the cases, subject-specific LOS submitted to an international benchmarking

### **5.2 Learning outcomes and external quality assurance (Q. 9-13)**

Q.9. Most of the agencies (90%) focus on programme accreditation or combine programme and institutional accreditation.

Q.10. and Q.11. QA agencies declare unanimous that LOS are taken into account in their institutional or programme evaluation. However, in most of the cases appropriate procedures are still in development (85%).

Q.12. In assessment procedures, LOS are mainly taken into account at the level of the learning objectives (intended learning outcomes) (100%), at the level of the learning assessment LOS(60%) and at the level of the programme results (achieved LOS) (60%).

Q.13. in 80% of the cases , evaluation of LOS is focused on the stimulation of the use of LOS in HEI, in 75% of the cases the focus is (also) on the validation of the effective results, the achieved learning outcomes.

## **6 Conclusions**

Globally we can conclude the following:

➤ **High degree of acceptance**

As all quality assurance agencies take into account the assessment of learning outcomes by some means or other (question 10), it can be assumed that the importance of the assessment of LOs is generally accepted by the quality assurance agencies.

➤ **Low degree of implementation and various approaches**

In contrast to this high degree of acceptance most of the quality assurance agencies are still in the process of developing their quality assurance procedures concerning learning outcomes

(question 11) and the approaches to the assessment of learning outcomes refer to different levels of the procedures (institutional management, programme objectives, learning assessment, etc.) (question 12).

➤ **Pending, open questions**

It could be assumed that narrowing the gap between a high degree of acceptance and a low degree of implementation is not only a matter of time, but that there are still some open questions and practical difficulties, e.g.:

- Is it sufficient to pay attention to the intended learning outcomes and the adequateness of the curriculum? - Or is it more important to focus on the appropriateness of the assessment procedures applied by the HEIs, or on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes (results), or on the HEIs' development process of the learning outcomes? Or do all these aspects have to be taken into account?
- What are actually the characteristics of a high-quality description of learning outcomes (on the programme level and on the module level)? And how to validly check whether the intended learning outcomes are in fact attained by the students?
- How to assure that the experts/review teams are familiar enough with the learning outcome topic and with the assessment of intended and/or achieved learning outcomes (importance of the training of review teams)?