

Course Designer: Defining Course Aims



Defining Course Aims

This section of the Course Designer defines the writing of course aims in terms of planning the purpose, priority and context of the course, as well as considering students' identities, experience and contribution.

What are course aims?

Course aims give an overall, course-level view of what a course is designed to achieve. Defining aims involves producing a precise and succinct summary that broadly articulates the course vision and values. These will encapsulate the purpose and intention of the course from the lecturers' and university perspective.

Devising course aims involves thinking about who the prospective students are and where they might be going when they finish the course (see also Course Vision and Values). Aims do not need to be measurable but may include description of larger assessment tasks and a description of broad assumptions about the applicability or value of knowledge, skills and attributes. Up to six aims are commonplace.

An aim should:

- Clearly state the course purpose
- Name what skills, knowledge or attributes students might gain
- Refer to teaching, learning experiences, assessment or resources if distinctive
- Create a context, environment or value-system within which the course is situated
- State what students might expect on completion in terms of outputs, employment or professional pathways

Why is it important to define course aims?

Clear, well-defined, course aims will assist with:

- Communicating the overall purpose and focus of the course to new and prospective students and other stakeholders
- Describing how the course (teaching, experiences, assessment or resources) enables students in their learning
- Establishing the context for the course in relation to other provision, as well as industry or social contexts¹

They can also help with:

- Aligning the course with QAA Subject Benchmark Statements²
- Articulating graduate attributes developed through the course³
- Enabling lecturers and managers to keep in mind the whole course and the student journey when designing units

What does student-centred course planning look like?

Courses attract students from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures, and curricula are designed with this range in mind. Student-centred planning ensures course accessibility (to meet legal duties to pre-empt student requirements due to issues such as disability) and has now expanded to become a key principle in student-centred learning.

Creating personas in order to visualise students can assist in writing the overarching purpose and intentions of the course design. Course designers consider 'who' the students are, or would be, as well as their contribution to the course.⁴

Asking 'Who-How-What?' in that order, provides a simple definition of student-centred planning. This relates back to the distinction between 'being, acting, knowing', or 'life-skills, methods and content' referred to earlier in Course Vision and Values (Rowntree 1981).

“Students are themselves an important part of the curriculum. Grundy suggests that they are the subject of the curriculum, not its object. Learning, not teaching, is the central concern of the teacher.”⁵



How to involve students in creating course aims?

Students can be co-designers of course aims in a range of ways, which may result in students designing their own essay questions, learning or assessment activities, or alumni contributing to course planning and evaluation meetings.⁶ Other components such as studio work, professional visits, dialogue, critical active learning can involve students and create a closer alignment between course activities and the student cohort.

In summary, aims are derived from the following aspects of a course:

- The subject area in relation to a wider context or contexts
- The balance, and relationship, between theory and practices
- The nature and combination of the learning environments e.g. digital and physical
- The key knowledges skills and attributes (knowing, doing, being) that are developed through the course
- The key teaching, learning and assessment approaches that reflect your collective values

Activities

Here are some prompts to help in writing course aims:⁷

“The course is aimed at students who wish to ... ”
(purposes)

“We value and encourage our students to be ... and we will support this by ... ”
(values)

“This course aims to create an environment which is ... and will achieve this by ...” (nature of the learning environment)

“As a result, the teaching, learning and assessment approaches will be organized along the lines of ... ”
(processes)

“The course will address the context of ... and inform students on a range of ...”
(content)

Here are some prompt questions to help connect the course with its actual, or potential, students:

Who are your students?

- What is their educational history?
- What is their prior experience?
- What types of diversity exist among the students?
- What are their reasons for studying and their future ambitions?
- What are their expectations?
- Where do they live? Do they commute?
- Do they work?
- What are their strengths?
- How do these students learn?

For existing courses:

- What student data can be used to evaluate the course?
- What do students say about the course?
- What do attainment differentials show and what are the strategies in place to ensure all groups can perform well?

References:

Full references can be found in the Course Designer Introduction and Resources List.

- (1) QAA Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies (2014) Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf>
- (2) QAA Subject Benchmark Statements. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements>
- (3) The UAL Creative Attributes Framework Available at: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/about-ual/teaching-and-learning-exchange/careers-and-employability/creative-attributes-framework>. The UAL Digital Creative Attributes Framework. Available at: <https://dcaf.myblog.arts.ac.uk/>
- (4) These simplifications and distinctions are also used by Warren (2016, p.12) in *Course and Learning Design and Evaluation*, referring to Jackson et al. 2002: 'Curriculum design...for [courses], [units] or individual sessions, is thus concerned with what is to be learnt (content); why (rationale and philosophy), how (process) and when (structure) it is to be learnt... all of which is shaped by the design principles and wider contexts (disciplinary, institutional, regulatory, political, societal) of the curriculum.' We add the key factor of 'who' - the student perspective.
- (5) Grundy (1987, p.76) in Fraser and Bosanquet (2007, p.280).
- (6) Bovill, C. and Woolmer, C. (2018, pp.407-422) describe examples of co-creation *in* and *of* the curriculum.
- (7) These are inspired by O'Neill's fictional example of a course and its educational philosophy (2015, p.24).



UAL Course Designer credits

Course Designer is a set of materials produced by the Teaching, Learning and Employability Exchange to support staff in designing arts curricula in Higher Education.

It is intended to complement course validation and/or reapproval, and will be useful to course leaders and teams who want to devise or revise their courses to ensure they are coherent.

The resource consists of:

- Introduction and Resources List
- Course Vision and Values
- **Defining Course Aims**
- Crafting Learning Outcomes
- Designing Inclusive Assessment
- Course Structure

Authors: Tim Stephens, Emily Salines and Clare Warner

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