Course Designer:

Crafting Learning Outcomes

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Once course aims have been established that define the purpose and priorities of the course, these are then converted into course learning outcomes (LO's). These course LO's are re-written as, and distributed across, unit level outcomes.

This section of the Course Designer will clarify the task of crafting learning outcomes.

An introduction to learning outcomes

The UK Higher Education sector has an outcomes-based approach to learning, teaching and assessment. All courses need to state what students should be able to do on completion in the form of learning outcomes expressed at both course and unit level.[1] These outcomes can be worded in terms of demonstrable knowledge, skills or behaviours.

Why do we use learning outcomes?

We use learning outcomes for both pedagogic and regulatory reasons:

→ To help students understand what is expected of them by being explicit, clear and transparent in the design and delivery of courses
→ To assist staff design and deliver teaching, learning and assessments that are aligned, detailed and at the appropriate level
→ To help staff create a coherent curriculum, that is planned in advance and focussed on student learning
→ To award credit to students for demonstrating they have achieved threshold learning outcomes
→ To meet university requirements for course validation and/or reapproval

Reference to relevant sector documents
LO's should align to the QAA Framework for HE Qualifications (FHEQ) and the UK Quality Code, the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements or Masters degree characteristics statements. Also, the SEEC level descriptors may be useful.[2]

The components of a learning outcome
A well constructed learning outcome typically has three elements:

→ An action verb to describe the behaviour (what the student will do) which demonstrates the student's learning
→ Information about the context for the demonstration
→ How well the outcome will be demonstrated[3]

E.g. **Write** well-structured learning outcomes **for your units, that communicate clearly** to your students what they are expected to do and achieve.

Examples of poorly constructed learning outcomes

"Students will study a range of 20th Century exhibitions, attend lectures and seminars, and demonstrate an awareness and working knowledge of selection and decision-making processes."

This outcome is indicating syllabus content and planned teaching activities which suggest that attendance is a criteria for a pass, instead of describing the learning activity. Also, the learning activity, or actions 'awareness' and 'working knowledge' are too ambiguous to be tested.

"Explore and analyse the role of digital media within contemporary theatre and performance, and illustrate and evaluate its use with reference to two examples."

This outcome has too many action verbs, which make it difficult to assess, and confusing for students who are being asked to demonstrate too many learning behaviours to achieve the pass threshold.

In summary, outcomes need to specific and clearly written, measurable and demonstrable, and aligned with what is taught and assessed, i.e. accessible, assessable and achievable.

A step by step guide to crafting learning outcomes

Step 1: course learning outcomes
Once course aims have been written the next step is to write the linked course learning outcomes.

These outcomes need to be directly assessable and are usually written in the format: 'On completion of the course all students will be able to …' Aims and outcomes should be aligned and coherent. Verb lists are often used as a tool to help write learning outcomes.[4]

Step 2: mapping course learning outcomes against subject benchmark statements
Course learning outcomes should align to the QAA subject benchmark statement or Master's degree characteristics statement. Map your learning outcomes to each of the statements to make sure they are all fully covered.[5]

At the end of this step you may need to go back to step 1 and revise your course learning outcomes in light of the sector documents.

Note that at Masters level the 'context for demonstration' of a LO might be professional or work-based, for example including 'the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility; decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations; and the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.'[6]

Step 3: writing unit learning outcomes by level
Once you have decided on the overall course learning outcomes, you then need to write the learning outcomes for each unit. It can be helpful to think of each level of study as building upon the previous level. Unit learning outcomes should illustrate the increased knowledge and skill of students and complexity of tasks between undergraduate levels 4, 5, and 6,

and postgraduate level 7. A guide to levels is outlined in the FHEQ Level descriptors.[7]

At UAL learning outcomes should also support the development of student attributes in the Creative Attributes Framework.[8]

Step 4: linking unit learning outcomes to assessment criteria
At UAL each of the learning outcomes needs to be linked to at least one of the five assessment criteria:

⟶ Enquiry
⟶ Knowledge
⟶ Process
⟶ Communication
⟶ Realisation

Not every unit needs to include all five criteria. It is perfectly acceptable to have two unit learning outcomes linked to just two of the assessment criteria.

Step 5: mapping unit and course learning outcomes
Go back to your course learning outcomes and make sure that the unit learning outcomes are aligned. It can be useful to create a grid for each course learning outcome and the relevant units or unit learning outcomes that map to that course outcome. A common example of a curriculum map or matrix is shown in Table 1.

Table 1:
Mapping learning outcomes across units

Course LOs:	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
LO 1	x			
LO 2		x		
LO 3	x		x	
LO 4			x	x

References:

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

⟶ (1) This approach is described as a rational-logical approach, or the technical-scientific (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.207) and can be traced back to Tyler's influential work (1949) on formalising curriculum in the U.S., in O'Neill, (2015) p.30 : 'The original work by Tyler (1949)[...] equates with the Product Model and is the foundation of the current Learning Outcomes Curriculum' (See Course Vision and Values).

⟶ (2) seec (2016) Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education. Available at http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf

⟶ (3) Credit: http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/curriculum/learning_outcomes/writing_outcomes.php

⟶ (4) There are a number of online versions of Bloom's taxonomy converted into verb lists. Available at: https://www.utica.edu/academic/Assessment/new/Blooms%20Taxonomy%20-%20Best.pdf

⟶ (5) QAA Subject Benchmark Statements. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements

⟶ (6) QAA, UK (2010) p.16 in O'Neill (2015 p.46). Other characteristics of Masters programmes also appear in Brown (2015) and Lord (2008) in O'Neill (2015, p.46).

⟶ (7) 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

⟶ Careers and Employability, UAL, *Creative Attributes Framework.* Available at: https://www.arts.ac.uk/about-ual/teaching-and-learning-exchange/careers-and-employability/creative-attributes-framework

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