



Department of Higher Education

Learning Outcomes

Many higher institutions internationally follow an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design. This approach provides an outline at the start of a course / module about what students are expected to achieve by the end of that course / module.

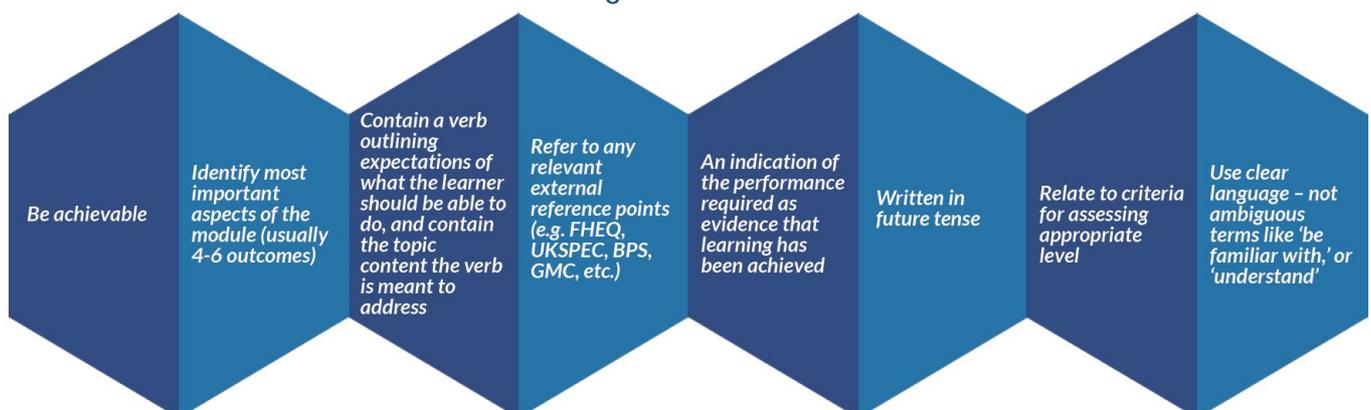
What is a learning outcome?

- A learning outcome is the minimum that a learner must achieve to pass (i.e. the threshold level).
- They should be written from the students' perspective.
- They should outline not only what is to be learnt (i.e. the topic), but also how it is to be learnt and to what standard.

Why are learning outcomes important?

- An effectively written learning outcome should assist staff to identify what they would like students to achieve, as well as supporting students to understand what is expected of them.

Other characteristics of effective learning outcomes:



Aligning the Curriculum

One of the most influential ideas in higher education is constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999), as it underpins the requirement for programme specifications, marking criteria, criterion-referenced assessment (i.e. marking against predefined criteria) and learning outcomes. Constructive alignment is the idea that student learning is a hidden and individual process for which students have responsibility. Teacher responsibility, therefore, lies in creating an environment that encourages and supports students to engage with learning. As a result, choice of assessment task can serve to support or undermine the achievement of these learning outcomes.

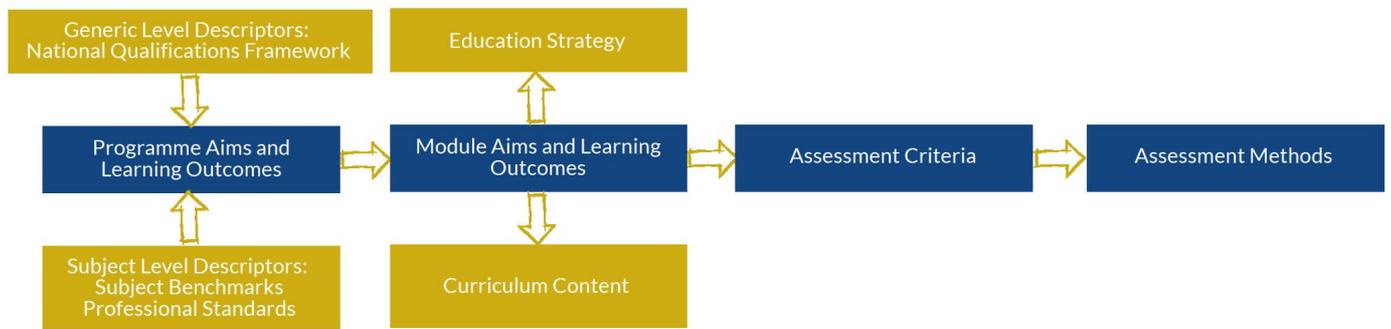
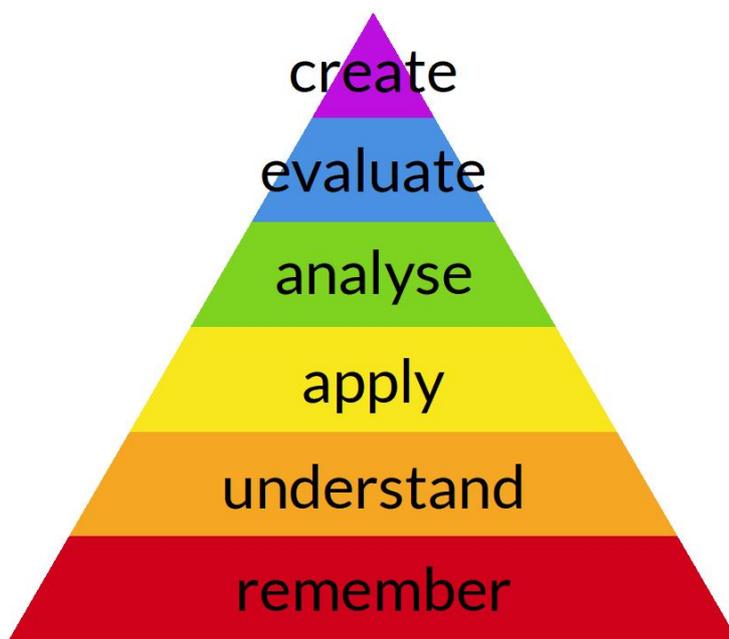


Figure 1. Constructive Alignment Overview (Biggs, 1999)

Classifying the cognitive level of outcomes

One of the key roles of an effective learning outcome is to distinguish the different levels of study, using appropriate verbs. The learning outcomes in combination with the associated assessment criteria should provide a definitive measure of level. There are several taxonomies available to support you in pitching a learning outcome at the correct level. Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Objectives is perhaps the most widely used. It outlines six levels of the 'cognitive domain', each of which builds on the previous level:



- The lower cognitive levels are more commonly used in relation to Levels 4 and 5 undergraduates
- The higher cognitive levels are more commonly used in relation to Levels 6 and 7.
- This is not to say that a Level 7 student will not first engage in the lower cognitive levels of learning, or that a Level 4 student is not capable of engaging in higher cognitive levels of thinking.

Further Resources

Biggs, J. (2014). Constructive alignment in university teaching. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*. <https://www.herdsa.org.au/herdsa-review-higher-education-vol-1/5-22>

Biggs, J. (1999). What the Student Does: teaching for enhanced learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18(1), 57-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436990180105>

Jackson, N., Wisdom, J., & Shaw, M. (2003). *Using learning outcomes to design a course and assess learning*. http://ects.emu.edu.tr/outcomes/SupplementaryOutcomesPapers_to_6/Using_LO_to_Design_Courses%20and%20Assess%20Learning.doc

Moon, J. (2007). *Linking levels, learning outcomes and assessment criteria*. http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Learning_Outcomes_Edinburgh_2004/77/4/040701-02Linking_Levels_plus_ass_crit-Moon_577774.pdf

SEEC (2016). *Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education*. <http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf>

Quality Assurance Agency (2018). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>

The Learning Institute, Queen Mary, University of London. *Good practice guide on writing aims and learning outcomes*. <https://academicdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Aims-and-Outcomes-Guide.pdf>