

Writing Levelled Learning Outcomes

A Guide to Student Continuation,
Completion and Success



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Preface

University Education Plan: The Learning Pathway

As outlined in our [Education Plan](#), students will follow a coherent course of study, underpinned by relevant research, which engages them, academically and professionally, builds their self-confidence and develops their expertise in their subject. They will be supported throughout each level of their course (and between undergraduate and postgraduate study) and encouraged to reflect upon their learning experience alongside their academic, professional, and personal development. Development of this approach is as much about the way in which we work with our students as about the content of their modules, strengthening a narrative of learning within a coherent course structure. Coherence in course design can enhance learning and improve students' continuation, completion and success. You can read more about the principles of [good course design here](#).

The course and module learning outcomes should be written to align with and support the following institutional context.

Level 4: Engagement

Our emphasis at level 4 is upon transition, enabling all students to understand, and meet, the challenges of learning within a University and supporting their success at the next levels of their course. By the end of level 4, students will be oriented and integrated into their learning environment. They will also be fully prepared for the remainder of their courses, with a sound understanding of the key concepts and knowledge required for successful completion. Students will have begun to develop the full range of skills needed to complete their courses and will be engaging confidently both with their course teams and with each other.

Level 5: Contextualisation

Our emphasis at level 5 is upon consolidation and deeper contextualisation. At this intermediate stage students will become more immersed in their subject, and able to reflect critically, both upon its nature and place within their future professional and/or academic lives. Students will begin to deepen and extend their awareness of the academic, professional, and personal opportunities available upon graduation and will be supported and encouraged to put their knowledge and skills into practice in an employment-related context.

Level 6: Independence

Our emphasis at level 6 is upon the strengthening and development of independence and the further growth of students as critical thinkers, increasingly knowledgeable and reflective, both about their own academic development and about the research environment of their subject. All students will be offered the opportunity to demonstrate this development, through a sustained piece of work (with a potential for interdisciplinary working) which shows them to be academically and professionally capable. They will be able to demonstrate the application of their knowledge and skills within real-world contexts.

Level 7: Sophistication

Our emphasis at level 7 is upon the transformation of students into sophisticated, independent, critical thinkers, able to apply their knowledge with originality within advanced academic and professional contexts. Level 7 is as much about transition as level 4, and we will support this transition so that all students will become confident in their academic and professional abilities and able to apply their knowledge and skills within complex situations. Through study at this level, students will have a thorough understanding of research, both as a practice and as a product, and be fully prepared for further development in either an academic, or professional, environment.

Introduction

The following guidance aims to support staff engaged in course development in the maintenance of the University's established position on the writing of learning outcomes. That position has been established with regard for the following principles:

- Each award offered on a course, whether a target or contained award, will have a discrete set of course learning outcomes which reflect both the award depth (related to its level) and its breadth (related to its credit point composition). They capture the knowledge, skills and understanding which we expect an award holder to possess.
- Each level of a course will have a set of defined learning outcomes. Level learning outcomes summarise students' progression in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding and are demonstrated through successful engagement with the assessment process.

1. Why?

You will be familiar with writing course learning outcomes; module aims and module learning outcomes in your course development work and as part of the information you add to the Course Specification and the Module Specification.

This guidance has been written to clarify the process for taught UG and PG programmes, as it is now a requirement in the Course Specification that you include level learning outcomes for every course in addition to the overall course learning outcomes. These represent what you wish the student to achieve by the end of each *level* of your course.

This will

- i) help in the development of a more coherent, accountable, learning programme
- ii) help to guide the students as they move through the programme and make it easier for them to see how they are progressing year on year
- iii) give additional clarity to professional bodies if they require the outcomes of each level to be specified prior to the course being accredited by them
- iv) give additional clarity of level achievement where students demonstrate threshold pass in a module.

Level learning outcomes - which are written into the Course Specification - are aligned to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications descriptors (QAA, 2021) and supported by our own

[Taxonomy of Assessment Domains](#) (Leeds Beckett University, 2015); (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001).

They should begin with...“By the end of this level you will be able to...”

In the Quality Code, the Quality Assurance Agency makes an explicit link between the volume of credit and the achievement of learning outcomes. As such, you will need to ensure that there is differentiation in the learning outcomes expressed as a summation of each level of study but also, for qualifications of differential credit attainment but which are awarded at the same level.

For example, a Certificate and Cert HE at Level 4 should have discrete learning outcomes with the former being a subset of the latter; ditto for Ordinary Degrees and Honours Degrees at Level 6, and for PG Certs, Diplomas and Masters awards at Level 7.

So in summary, discrete learning outcomes are established:

- i) for each level of a course (Level Learning Outcomes);
- ii) for those contained awards whose credit composition does not equate to a full level (Contained Award Outcomes);
- iii) for target awards (Course Learning Outcomes).

2. Constructive alignment:

Writing all learning outcomes (whether they be specifically focussed module ones, synthesised module aims or the broader course outcomes) is an integral part of *course design and constructive alignment* (Biggs, 1982). This is when course, level and module learning outcomes, learning, and teaching approaches, assessment methods and assessment criteria are aligned and relate to each other in a coherent and nested way.

Learning outcomes for levels and modules are *not* a wish list - they are threshold level - and, as such, should not be too ambitious—i.e., they are written for students who achieve the pass requirement for the module/level. It is the marking criteria which distinguishes the level of achievement and differentiates between satisfactory, good, and excellent student performance in the module assessment.

3. Choosing your words correctly:

As a good rule, the level learning outcomes and the modules written to those levels should predominantly contain verbs as follows and align with the qualification descriptor expectations (Anderson, Krathwohl et al, 2001; QAA, 2018).

They should begin “By the end of this course/level/module you will be able to ...”

Level 4 Use basic verbs e.g., *describe, identify, collect* information

Level 5 Use *compare, contrast, justify*

Level 6 Multiple verbs are ok - critically *appraise, critically evaluate*

Level 7 ...must acknowledge *the context* in which the learner is operating, e.g., “Critically *evaluate* the role of the QAA in Higher Education and *hypothesise* as to its future structure, roles and responsibilities.”

You can use our Taxonomy of Assessment Domains to help you with this.

https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/teachlearn/-/media/files/clt/clttaxonomy_of_assessment_domains.pdf

4. PG Awards:

The University’s taught postgraduate awards include: Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma and MSc/MA awarded for 60, 120 and 180 credit points at Level 7 respectively and our Integrated Masters programmes, where students undertake 360 credit points at UG level and a further 120 credits at Level 7. Within our Academic Regulations, the PG Cert and PG Dip are identified as standard contained awards for Masters awards, with an integrated Masters programme also including contained awards of CertHE, DipHE, Ordinary Degree and Honours Degree.

Principle 11 – QAA Quality Code for HE, 2024 states that there is a requirement for programme learning outcomes for each programme, and that learning outcomes for qualifications are specified clearly (including those for any intermediate or exit qualifications within them). Essentially, when making an award (contained or target), learning outcomes should be positively defined and achievement demonstrated before the award is made. At validation events the panel would expect to see level learning outcomes at all levels included in the documentation and to be able to differentiate between target and contained awards made at the same level in terms of the breadth of learning outcomes which relate to each.

This approach also supports Boards of Examiners in exercising academic judgement in the awarding of contained awards: their learning outcomes should be differentiated and discrete, so it is clear what students with lesser credit attainments are expected to know, understand and demonstrate through their achievements.

When drafting learning outcomes for the PG Cert and PG Dip, it is important to note that there is no *progression* between Postgraduate awards; **all have outcomes written to Level 7 expectations**. Some awards may have a defined order for the delivery of modules to ensure that there is a coherent experience for the students. This should be clearly stated in the Course Specification.

Where PG Cert and PG Dip are either defined contained awards or are offered as targets in their own right, there should be appropriate differentiation between their respective required learning outcomes. However, there should be coherence across the different exit awards outcomes. Students are moving through a Level 7 journey to Masterliness. The PG Cert and Dip outcomes are nested within the Masters outcomes (although specifically identified) and should really be a subset of the Masters level outcomes.

The following provides a framework which may be of use in defining differentiated learning outcomes for the PG Cert and PG Dip:

PG Cert – 60 credit points

Learning outcomes to include:

- a. Demonstrate a critical awareness and systematic evaluation of (insert academic or professional discipline here)
- b. Critically evaluate current research and advanced scholarship in (academic or professional discipline)
- c. Additional learning outcome

PG Dip 120 credit points

Learning outcomes to include:

- a. Use a and b from PG Cert plus
- b. Demonstrate originality in the application of knowledge and techniques to create and interpret knowledge in the area of (academic or professional discipline)
- c. Additional learning outcome

Masters awards - 180 credit points

Learning outcomes encapsulating those in the PG Cert and PG Dip above plus learning outcomes related to the ability to undertake research activity relevant to the academic or professional discipline.

5. Assessments and Learning outcomes v marks, progression, and degree classification:

It is important to remember that the writing of learning outcomes at Levels 5 and 6 are separate from the process involved in degree classification calculation which involves a numerical weighted calculation of, usually, Level 5 & 6 marks.

Students' marks represent how well they have met the learning outcomes of the module as indicated from their performance in the assessment. The successful meeting of the assessment criteria which meets all the learning outcomes of the module allows the student to pass the module. Students must expect to be assessed on all module learning outcomes. If there are two summative assessments allocated per module, the module learning outcomes can be "spread" to be met across the two methods of assessment (chosen to best test these criteria), e. g. a presentation (50%) plus the assignment (50%).

The University's regulations for both progression and award do allow for condonement of a failed 20 credit point module. However, this is on the understanding that the course development process has ensured that either level or course learning outcomes can demonstrably be met through the achievement of a pass in more than one module. For this reason, colleagues should carefully consider the implication of having either a course or a level learning outcome which is underpinned by a single module.

6. UG Awards:

Your course learning outcomes (on a standard UG programme) will normally encapsulate the outcomes identified for the successful conclusion of Level 6, alongside any additional learning undertaken by the student at earlier levels which contributes to the knowledge, skills and understanding which the achievement of an Honours Degree requires. However, sometimes learning outcomes from other levels can be synthesised into contributing to the final list of course learning outcomes. For example, sometimes students undertake practice placements at Levels 4 and 5 and not at Level 6.

Level learning outcomes, in the Course Specification, are derived directly from the module aims from all modules at Levels 4 and 5. They should be copied from each module aim at each level. If you have six Level 5 modules, you will have six module aims. Once you have collated your six module aims for each level, ask yourself - *Do these really encapsulate the essence of the level-ness requirements for this course?* If the answer to this is “no” - go back and review your modules and modify where if necessary. This is an integral part of the practice of the course development team. If you have double modules you might want to add an additional level outcome which captures any further elements of the identity of that course level – for example, an additional element which might reflect the element of reflective practice or applied learning.

The difference between Level LOs and Course LOs (CLOs) (e.g. at L6) could be approached in the following way (using a constructive alignment model)

- In the first instance the CLOs would be developed (these learning outcomes should encompass all of the “key concepts” students will be expected to have demonstrated during the course and may be influenced by some of the level learning outcomes but may also encompass broader skills such as reflective practice, critical thinking and scholarship);
- Next the L6 LOs are developed (which should then be used to influence the module LOs at Level 6);
- Then L5;
- Then L4.

Here is an example of how this might look across a course if “critical thinking” is adopted as a theme:

- Course LO: Students will have demonstrated their ability to develop and apply critical thinking in a range of settings including understand the logical connections between ideas and the identification, construction, and evaluation of arguments.
- A L6 LO might be written as: By the end of this level students will be able to critically evaluate and justify existing information and methodologies as well as create new connections between theoretical perspectives, methods and the strategies applied.
- A L5 LO might be written as: By the end of this level students will be able to organise, connect and make informed judgements about information and its relation to underpinning knowledge and principles.

- A L4 LO might be written as: BY the end of this level students will be able to organise, justify and make connections about subject information, the validity of ideas and/ or the quality of work based on a set of criteria.

There may, of course, be some overlap between Level LOs and Module LOs but at a modular level it would be expected that the LO will be specifically written with the assessment type in mind.

Example at L5: Students will be able to demonstrate their ability to organise and connect information and resources effectively to produce a product to a specified professional brief.

This approach can also be used at Masters level for the nested outcomes. For PG Cert course documentation, critical awareness and systematic evaluation should be emphasised. For PG Dips (achievement of 120 credit points) then originality in knowledge application and creation and interpretative skills should be included. It is worth looking at the [taxonomy of assessment domains](#) which cover undergraduate and postgraduate learning outcomes to help with these. Masters level outcomes would include those commensurate with dissertation achievement such as advanced research skills and scholarship and investigation appropriate to the professional area.

7. PG and UG Option modules:

You may have option modules at Level 5/6 or 7, and it is important to consider their aims, learning outcomes and content as part of the overall coherence of the course design. However, when it comes to the specifics of writing just the course, award, and level learning outcomes, you should primarily consider the module aims of the *core* modules when you write these.

Sometimes you might want to add a suitably worded course or level learning outcome which reflects the “breadth of understanding” in a subject area. It is easier to use the module aims of the core modules to form the basis of your level learning outcomes and add a synthesis of any remaining option module aims to make up the remainder of the level outcomes. “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts” and the overall six level outcomes should prioritise the essence of *the* learning outcomes from the core modules being considered. If your option modules have been well-written, they should support the overall course identity, the essence of “level-ness” and the philosophy of the programme, i.e., it all hangs together in a coherent manner and feels distinctive.

References

References can be found in the Talis reading list

<https://rl.talis.com/3/beckett/lists/8314F69F-7DE0-6CB5-C59F-EA078146425D.html?lang=en-GB&login=1>

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