Writing Programme Aims and Learning Outcomes

Introduction
Programme Specifications are required for each taught programme on offer at every level of undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Much of the challenge of that task is writing educational aims for the programme as a whole and for each level, which relate very closely to the learning outcomes in terms of what the student will be able to do by the end of a session, module, level or programme. The University’s policy is that all programmes and modules should be described in terms of learning outcomes in a language directed towards the student. All this information must be made available to students and be accessible in printed and/or electronic form (or other alternative formats as appropriate) both to help potential students decide whether they wish to take the module or programme concerned and to guide them in taking responsibility for their own learning.

Aims
Aims are a General statement of Intent, in broad terms, directions for the content of the course:

1. What is the purpose of this programme/module of study?
2. What is the programme/module intended to achieve?

Learning Outcomes
The learning outcomes of a programme or module should specify the knowledge and skills (and, where appropriate, any other attributes) that someone will be required to demonstrate in order to pass the programme or module successfully.

Learning outcomes can be constructed in three domains: knowledge (cognitive), skills (psychomotor) and attitudes (affective). The latter domain is important in some programmes, e.g. professionally based disciplines such as social work, health and education. In these programmes, for example, learning outcomes need to include an evaluation of a students’ capacity to appreciate cultural diversity and its implications for professional practice.

The published learning outcomes of a programme or module thus answer the question “What has a graduate of this programme or module demonstrated they know and can do?”.

A well-formed learning outcome does not specify the content or syllabus but rather the level to which the skills and/or knowledge should be demonstrated, and says something about the context in which they should be demonstrated. The context should create an inclusive approach to learning and value a diversity of perspectives in learning. Where it is appropriate disciplines should include issues relating to equal opportunities within the curriculum with appropriate presentation and language. In such instances this should be reflected in learning outcomes.

What is the Relation between Aims and Learning Outcomes?
Learning outcomes must be achievable by students within the time available and at the level the students are at. The learning outcome of a module of study should link back closely to, and be consistent with, the aims.

A useful way of drafting learning outcomes is to use the stem: ‘On successful completion of the module you will be able to:’

For the average module of study you probably should aim to have between five and eight learning outcomes. If you have more than ten, you probably have too much detail and assessing them all will get unmanageable.
Do Learning Outcomes replace the Syllabus?
No. A syllabus describes the content, topics, and subject matter. Learning outcomes describe what students will be able to do with that content.

How to Write Learning Outcomes
A clear learning outcome does three things:

• It says what students should be able to do;
• It says something about the conditions under which they should be able to do it;
• It says something about how well they should be able to do it.

Therefore a well-written learning outcome is likely to contain the following components:

• An active verb that indicates what the learner is expected to be able to know, think or do by the end of the period of learning which is often qualified by adding a condition and a standard.

Learning outcomes are normally written at threshold level; ie a description of what must be demonstrated to pass.

So, for example, a learning outcome might be:

On successful completion of the module you will be able to:

• describe the principal mechanisms of action and use of drugs to treat diseases of the nervous, locomotor, respiratory, cardiovascular and renal systems

The verb is ‘to describe’.

The standard is ‘principal mechanisms of action and use’.

The condition is ‘to treat diseases of the nervous, locomotor, respiratory, cardiovascular and renal systems

Other examples are:

1) By the end of the year you should have acquired and refined skills so that you can:

• work as part of a small group or team in a professional manner
• engage in self-directed and reflective learning
• complete a project which benefits a community organisation

2) By the end of the course you should have explored and reflected upon your attitudes and behaviour so you can:

• develop your communication skills
• demonstrate your concern for the interests and dignity of other people including patients
• develop your skills of independent study, including time management and IT skills
• develop your skills in team working, professional and personal responsibility, and personal contributions to the successful functioning and development of your Faculty and the University
• appreciate the importance of diversity in both the student population and the healthcare context.

You may find the list of verbs in the appendix helpful.

Point of Good Practice
Keep learning outcomes simple, normally use only one active verb per sentence and avoid jargon.

Develop learning outcomes for each level of study separately even if two levels are combined in terms of content; different levels must have separate assessment and learning outcomes that relate to assessment.

Learning outcomes are written at threshold standards of what’s acceptable to pass/fail. There must be a very clear relationship between the learning outcomes, the method of assessment and the assessment criteria used to judge levels above threshold.

Grading a student’s performance is separate from judging whether they have attained to learning outcome; if the learning outcome is met, the student passes; if they do better than the threshold standard, the assessment criteria should guide the assigning of the exact mark.

In principle, if learning outcomes are deemed essential, they must be assessed.

Not all learning must be specified in the learning outcomes, as a lot of learning is general to all modules and does not have to be specified.

Learning outcomes need to be realistic about what students can achieve and not set at the level to suit the best students.

**Communicating to Students**

A very important purpose in specifying aims and learning outcomes is to communicate clearly to students what they are expected to achieve as a result of studying the programme or module, and thus what they will be expected to demonstrate at assessment. Aims and learning outcomes should thus be written in terms that can be understood by an intending or potential student and very technical language should be avoided. It is the normal expectation in the University that learning outcomes will be addressed to students – i.e. ‘you will be able to…’

**Learning Outcomes and Assessment**

Assessment must be consistent with the learning outcomes. The assessment should test some or all of the published learning outcomes of the module. Assessment should not test skills that are not described in the learning outcomes. Assessment criteria are needed to help students understand what they have to do to pass, and beyond that to get a particular grade.

The inter relationship between aims, learning outcomes and assessment criteria needs to be at the heart of curriculum design and staff need to explicitly introduce these links into students’ thinking.

**Helpful References for Further Reading**