# Tips for Writing Programme and Module Learning Outcomes[1]

### What are Programme Learning Outcomes?

A programme learning outcome is a statement of what a learner is expected to know, to understand or to be able to do upon successful completion of a programme.

When writing programme learning outcomes, the expectation of a successful graduate should be evident and in line with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) defined standards.[2] Specified standards of knowledge, skills and competence at each of the ten NFQ award levels are outlined in the programme learning outcomes at each award level.[3]

A list of programme learning outcomes should commence with the following phrase:

**On successful completion of this programme, the graduate will…**

This statement will be followed by a list of statements which indicate what the graduate will know or be able to do upon successful completion of the programme. Approximately six to ten outcomes should be specified for a programme.

The statements are organised into three strands, in accordance with NFQ active standards for HE:

1. *Knowledge - Breadth and Kind*
2. *Know-how and Skill - Range and Selectivity*
3. *Competence - Context and Role; Learning to Learn; and Insight[4]*

Given that the statements capture the learning outcomes for an entire programme, they will be quite broad and will commence with phrases such as 'know', 'be able to', or their equivalents.

Finally, it is important to consider how the programme aligns with UL's Curriculum Framework. For example, are UL's Graduate Attributes embedded at programme level and across the modules, as appropriate?

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Curriculum design is a complex process, with potential for "fragmentation and disjointed thinking" (O'Neill et al., 2014: 268) if not carefully planned and sequenced. Considered curriculum planning is extremely important, particularly when working within modular systems in order to ensure coherence, sequencing and relevance of a programme of study and its teaching, learning and assessment activities (O'Neill et al., 2014: 269). Consequently, it is extremely important that programme teams work together to design programme learning outcomes and to map the teaching, learning and assessment across the entire programme in order to ensure that intended learning outcome are achieved.

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### References

Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (3rd ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

O'Neill, G., Donnelly, R. and Fitzmaurice, M. (2014) 'Supporting programme teams to develop sequencing in higher education curricula'. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(4): 268-280.

### What are Module Learning Outcomes?

A module learning outcome is a statement of what a learner is expected to be able to do upon successful completion of a module.

Module learning outcomes focus on what the learner can demonstrate upon successful completion of a module. While programme learning outcomes incorporate statements of what a student is expected to know, to understand or to be able to do upon successful completion of a programme, module learning outcomes are written in such a way that they clearly indicate how the students will demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, skill or competence.

A list of module learning outcomes should commence with the following phrase:

**On successful completion of this module, students will be able to…**

This phrase is followed by a list of statements, which commence with an action verb that allows students to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes can specify behaviour in one of three domains: cognitive, affective or psychomotor.

Different verbs can be used to demonstrate different levels of learning. For example, when writing cognitive learning outcomes, use verbs appropriate to the level of cognitive activity required of the student. Using Bloom's classification of levels, and its associated verbs, can be extremely beneficial. (See UL's comprehensive guide to Writing Learning Outcomes for lists of verbs associated with each level of cognitive activity.)

Key things to consider when writing module learning outcomes:

- ✓ Be clear, specific and use language that students will understand.
- ✓ Identify a manageable number of learning outcomes. Aim for no more than six learning outcomes per module.
- ✓ Start each statement with an action verb that clearly indicates the level of learning required of a student. Avoid verbs that are vague and subject to interpretation.
- ✓ Ensure that each identified learning outcome can be measured/ assessed and that it is appropriate to the level of learning of the specific programme.
- ✓ Identify appropriate assessment techniques that will allow the learner to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes.
- ✓ Be realistic and cognisant of what is manageable at the level and credit load assigned to the module.
- ✓ Consider how module learning outcomes align with the rest of the programme and related learning outcomes.

In a well-designed module, there will be clear alignment between the learning outcomes, the teaching strategies and the assessment methods employed to ascertain the student's level of attainment and achievement of the learning outcomes (See Biggs and Tang, 2007 on constructive alignment).

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### Consultation on curriculum design

For further advice on curriculum design or on writing programme learning outcomes, please contact Dr. Íde O'Sullivan, Curriculum Development Support Lead, at **ide.osullivan@ul.ie**

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[1] These guidelines should be used in conjunction with UL's comprehensive guide to *Writing Learning Outcomes: A Guide for Academics*, which is available here: https://www.ul.ie/ctl/sites/ctl/files/user_media/documents/support_-_writing_learning_outcomes_at_programme_and_module_levels.pdf.
[2] NFQ Standards and Guidelines are outlined here: https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/qqi-awards/qqi-awards-standards.
[3] Learning outcomes at the different levels at which the university offers programmes of study are provided by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The NFQ's major award-type descriptors are default standards for HE awards. Active NFQ Standards for Higher Education can be found here: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-12/generic-major-awards-qqi-awards-standards.pdf
[4] UL's APRC documentation requires programmes to list learning outcomes in the *Competence* strand in the three specific areas separately.