1 Some examples of learning outcomes

(1) Level 2 B.Ed programme

At the end of the module the learner is expected to be able to:

- explain the more common reasons for difficult behaviour in primary school children in class situations, indicating standard techniques for ameliorating that behaviour.

(2) Level 3 English Literature

At the end of the module, the learner is expected to be able to:

- explain in detail the influences of the historical and social context within which the chosen text is set, both from the study of the text itself and from the study of other contemporary literature.

(3) Level 2 Physics

At the end of the module, the learner is expected to be able to:

- correctly perform calculations on wave functions and in the solution of the Schroedinger equation for a range of one-dimensional problems.

2 Introduction to the use of learning outcomes

2.1 A statement of learning outcome is a tool used to describe the learning to be achieved by a student in higher education. Learning outcomes are linked by definition to the credit that is attributed to modules. A learning outcome statement is defined as

‘an expression of what a student will demonstrate on the successful completion of a module. Learning outcomes are related to the level of learning; indicate the intended gain in knowledge and skills that a typical student will achieve and should be capable of being assessed.’

2.2 Learning outcomes are in the language of learning (not teaching), they describe learning that is expected to have been achieved at the end of the module (not what we hope that students will learn) and achievement is judged by representation of the learning (since we can only observe what a student has learnt through a representation of that learning - we cannot see inside students' heads).
2.3 Learning outcomes should be written in a manner whereby the learning can be assessed though use of an assessment method. This link with assessment is crucial for quality assurance.

2.4 It is also important to note that learning outcomes are linked to level descriptors. The words used imply that the learning is at a particular standard. Linking learning outcomes to level descriptors ensures that we build progression into programmes.

2.5 Another point (expanded later, see section 6 below) is that learning outcomes represent essential learning for the passing of a module.

3 Learning outcomes, aims and objectives

3.1 The difference between learning outcomes and aims is that aims are written in terms of teaching intention and indicate what it is that the teacher intends to cover in the block of learning (curriculum coverage). Learning outcomes are descriptions of what the learner is expected to learn in the period of learning defined. Aims are therefore more about teaching and the management of learning, and learning outcomes are more about the learning that is actually to be achieved by the learner.

3.2 The word ‘objectives’ complicates the situation since objectives may be written in the terms of teaching intention or expected learning outcome. This complication is the reason for abandoning the use of the term ‘objectives’ in the description of modules or programmes.

3.3 Since learning outcomes and aims have different functions, it is useful to write an aim for a module in addition to learning outcomes. An aim can be a statement of general teaching intention and coverage as well as indicating the content of the module and its relationship to other learning or the whole programme, etc. In effect, an aim provides direction for the teaching of the module.

4 The use of learning outcomes

4.1 Learning outcomes are written for modules. There would usually be between three and eight statements for a module (though sometimes these are combined under one stem, see below). If there are more than eight learning outcomes, they are dealing with small detail and usually have become more like assessment criteria.

4.2 As we have said, it is to be expected that learning outcomes should be assessed. In theory, all of the learning outcomes are assessed in every module. In effect, when we use a choice of coursework or choice in examinations, it is quite likely that we do not actually assess every outcome. We say, therefore, that we should feel confident that we have adequately sampled the learning though assessment and that a successful student has achieved the learning described.

5 The format of learning outcomes

5.1 The stem of a learning outcome is usually something like: ‘at the end of this module (block of learning) the learner is expected to be able to…’. The word ‘expected’ is important. We cannot make a student learn and to say ‘a student will learn’ could invite litigation. Another
means of stating the same proviso is to call learning outcomes ‘intended learning outcomes’.

5.2 A well-written learning outcome is likely to contain the following components:

- A verb that indicates what the learner is expected to be able to do at the end of the period of learning.
- Word(s) that indicate on what or with what the learner is acting. If the outcome is about skills then the word(s) may describe the way the skill is performed (e.g. ‘jump up and down competently’).
- Word(s) that indicate the nature (in context or in terms of standard) of the performance required as evidence that the learning was achieved.

5.3 Taking the example above (1(2)),

‘explain the influences of the historical and social context within which the chosen text is set, both from the study of the text itself and of the study of other contemporary literature’:

- the verb is ‘explain’ (what the learner has to do);
- the words that indicate on what or with what the learner is acting, the influences of the historical and social context etc.
- the words that describe the nature of the performance are ‘explain in detail understanding’ and ‘the study of the text’ and ‘the study of other contemporary literature.

5.4 The third component of the learning outcome tends frequently to be omitted. Since it is the component that mainly provides the link to assessment and level descriptors, its presence is important to ensure the links in the cycle. However, when there are clear and stated assessment criteria that are obviously linked to the learning outcome in other components, the third component is less important.

6 Personal Transferrable Skills (PTS)

6.1 In order to map the skills that students are learning across the university, it is important to identify clearly the personal / transferable skills that are expected to be gained in the module in separate learning outcomes, labelled as ‘personal / transferable skills outcomes’. Examples of personal transferable skills include:

- Self-management;
- Learning skills;
- Communication;
- Teamwork;
- Problem-solving;
- Data-handling skills.
6.2 PTS should be developed in the context of academic study and should not so affect the content of a programme as to threaten the academic justification for its overall title and objective.

6.3 The content of different modules should not necessarily accord equal importance to PTS but the PTS component should be made overt.

6.4 Departments should have access to appropriate expertise in PTS development and assessment before being required to promote such activities.

6.5 The PTS experience of students while studying at University should be facilitated to enhance their learning experiences. On graduating students should possess PTS experience that would enhance the prospect of success in acquiring employment and that would equip them to adapt to the demands of the workplace once in employment.

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June 2005

Last updated September 2010

Last reviewed September 2011