

Guidance on writing aims and learning outcomes

1. Introduction

As designers of learning environments for students it is important to specify:

- a. what we intend the students to learn,
- b. how we are going to deliver and support this learning, and
- c. how we satisfy ourselves and the institution that learning has occurred.

This section is concerned with defining aims and learning outcomes for learning and teaching, and addressing the integrated nature of learning outcomes and assessment. It is designed for use in conjunction with questions 24 & 25 on form SENAS 1.

2. Rationale for using aims and learning outcomes

Stating aims and learning outcomes has the following benefits;

- a. they communicate the educational intent of the course / programme to students and to colleagues,
- b. they help to direct course / programme design by addressing the learning needs of students,
- c. they inform learning and teaching approaches appropriately,
- d. they ensure that assessment is securely integrated,
- e. they help to identify the resources needed to run the course / programme,
- f. they provide a basis for quality assurance and enhancement.

3. Definitions

AIM: a broad, general statement of educational intent that indicates the overall desired goal of the course / programme.

LEARNING OUTCOME: an achievement that may take the form of acquired knowledge, understanding, an intellectual, practical or transferable skill, and which is intrinsically linked to assessment.

Learning outcomes should articulate what the student will have learned or be able to do as a result of undertaking a particular course / programme. The art of producing meaningful learning outcomes lies in producing statements that are intrinsically important to a course / programme, but at the same time sufficiently specific so that they can be readily understood and tested.

The vocabulary used in this area of course design is prone to change, and frequently causes confusion. Previously, the terms “objective” and “learning outcome” have been used, sometimes interchangeably. As courses / programmes are now outcomes-driven, the use of objectives in course descriptors has now been abandoned.

4. The design context of aims and learning outcomes

When designing course / programme materials it is necessary to consider the context in which the materials are being delivered. Broadly, the aims and learning outcomes of the degree programme

should feed through to individual courses, whose aims and learning outcomes in turn should feed through to individual learning sessions. This is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1.

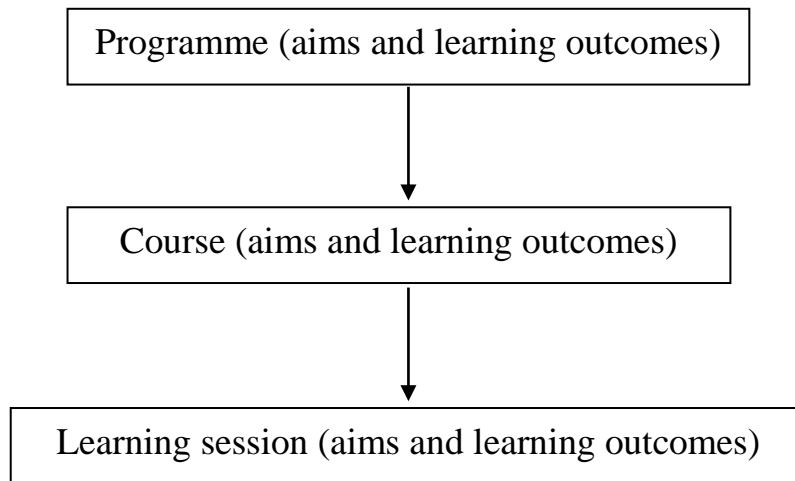


Figure 1. The relationship between aims and learning outcomes from programme to the individual learning session.

Specifically, the learning outcomes should be seen as central to the design process, as suggested in Figure 2.

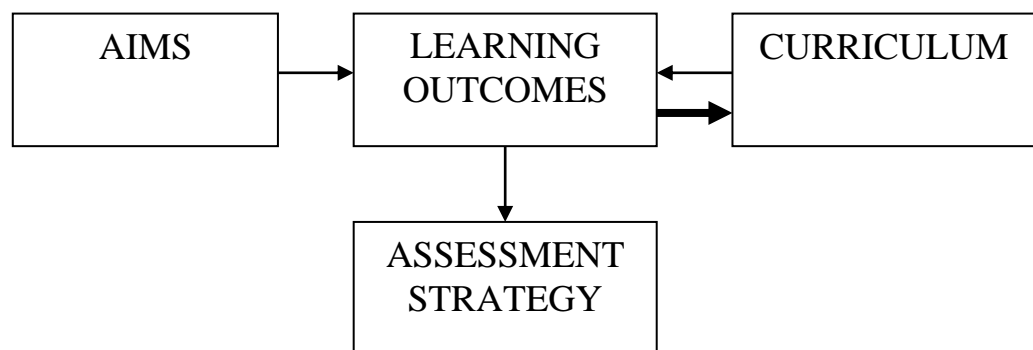


Figure 2. The central position of learning outcomes in programme / course design.

Notes to accompany Figure 2

- *Only the most relevant relationships between individual elements are shown in Figure 2.*
- *Identify aims before attempting to establish or negotiate learning outcomes.*
- *A two-way relationship exists between outcomes and curriculum. The wide arrow attempts to indicate the centrality of learning outcomes, and the development of a curriculum diet based on these predetermined outcomes. The thinner arrow is included, however, in order to indicate that external curricular requirements (e.g. from professional bodies) may, in some disciplines, direct the learning outcomes.*

5. The importance of level

When determining the learning outcomes for a course / programme, it is necessary to consider the level at which the particular outcomes are set relative to the prior achievements of the

student cohort. The University's course proposal forms request that this information is provided in order to support statements of progression as articulated through programme specifications.

Clearly not every course can deliver every aspect of learning as outlined in question 25. However, reference to the curriculum map will indicate how courses can be designed to build on the strengths of student experience from elsewhere in the degree programme. This process will also indicate how the learning outcomes from a particular course can be used to support developments elsewhere in the programme.

6. Assessment and learning outcomes

Note that during the delivery of course materials one may differentiate INTENDED and UNINTENDED learning outcomes. Despite the (often useful) unintended outcomes of course delivery, teaching remains a deliberate act with intentional learning outcomes. It is important that the assessment strategy and diet can differentiate these two areas effectively and transparently.

7. Further advice

Further advice on writing aims and learning outcomes is available from Dr Darren Comber in the Centre for Academic Development (tel: 3612).