Assuring Graduate Capabilities

How to specify Course Learning Outcomes

Course Learning Outcomes convey what graduates of a course can do. They are best derived from an integration of

- the institution's published graduate outcomes (capabilities or attributes)
- the Australian Qualifications Framework
- professional accreditation requirements or standards
- local needs (outcomes that would give graduates an edge in the local arena, or strategic regional goals or needs).

Characteristics of good course learning outcomes

Good learning outcomes begin with a strong action verb and describe an intellectually challenging, observable and measurable achievement. They must be easily understood by students, teaching staff, professional bodies and community members familiar with the field. They are:

- Clearly stated: Free from jargon and complex vocabulary, they describe specific and achievable tasks (using verbs such as 'describe', 'analyse' or 'evaluate' rather than verbs like 'appreciate', 'understand' or 'explore').

- Essential learning: They describe high level essential (rather than trivial) learning which a graduate must achieve.

- Achievable: They can be achieved within the time and resources allocated to the course.

- Demonstrable: They can be evidenced in tangible ways.

- Assessable: They will lead to the creation of artefacts which can evidence that performance is at the required level.

- Fair and equitable: All students, regardless of their mode of study, and including those with disabilities or constraints, have a fair chance of achieving them.

Suggested steps for creating Course Learning Outcomes

Step 1: Research where course graduates gain employment, and the capabilities they require for success. In addition to desktop research, consult professional bodies, industry leaders, expert practitioners, graduate recruiters or employers from small business, alumni networks, teaching staff. See the Graduate Employability Indicators for a survey instrument that may be of use.

Step 2: With a summary of your findings, form a working party composed of the range of stakeholders, as well as all those who lead units in the course. Using a framework, such as the one available in the adaptable Deakin University Course Learning Outcomes templates, map across the document to create, in the right hand columns, clear, succinct statements indicating what graduates of this course must be able to do, and brief descriptors indicating the minimum required level of performance. The performance descriptors will not encompass every single aspect of the course, but they should provide broad brush signals about what is expected by graduation:

Since 2012, Deakin University's Course Enhancement Process (see the Guiding Principles) ensures every course has a clear and concise set of Course learning outcomes and minimum standards aligned with Deakin's Graduate Learning Outcomes, accreditation requirements (where applicable) and the Australian Qualifications Framework. The Deakin University templates are downloadable:

- Course Learning Outcomes template AQF level 7 Bachelor [PDF 269 KB] [Word 248 KB]
- Course Learning Outcomes template AQF level 8 Graduate Certificate [PDF 258 KB] [Word 248 KB]
- Course Learning Outcomes template AQF level 8 Graduate Diploma [PDF 258 KB] [Word 247 KB]
- Course Learning Outcomes template AQF level 8 Bachelor Honours [PDF 262 KB] [Word 252 KB]
- Course Learning Outcomes template AQF level 9 Masters Coursework [PDF 267 KB] [Word 248 KB]

Step 3: Role play might assist to check that the statements are accurate and comprehensible. Have a team member act as a prospective student who enquires about enrolling in the course. The student wants to know what they will be able to know or do if they are successful in the course, and to be highly employable. Use everyday language to communicate clearly to the student what he or she will be able to do if they successfully complete the course. Check with industry representatives that outcomes are appropriate.

Step 4: Craft the statements into learning outcomes, avoiding educational jargon and ensuring each begins with a verb which clearly describes what students will be able to do. Be specific (for example, students will be able to 'describe' or 'analyse' or 'evaluate') rather than vague (avoid 'appreciate', 'understand', 'explore' or 'be familiar with'). Ensure the outcomes can be observed and evidenced, and that they are intellectually challenging and pitched at the workplace performance expected of a new graduate.

Step 5: Consider how assessments can be designed to enable students to create evidence of their mastery: it is difficult to assess 'attitudes' and less so to assess behaviours that are consistent with a desired attitude. A portfolio of evidence will contain artefacts that evidence the Course Learning Outcomes and standards—usually any one artefact can evidence more than one outcome.

Step 6: Design communication strategies and artefacts for students, teaching staff, industry partners and assessors. Ensure the verbal and visual language is used consistently through course guides, paper and digital, as well as unit materials, marketing materials, websites, and so on. Check regularly that the Course Learning Outcomes are appropriate, that performance descriptors are at the appropriate standard, and that students are educated to create and curate evidence which demonstrates achievement of all of them by graduation.