How to write learning outcomes.

This guidance is provided in addition to, and should be read in conjunction with:

Guidance provided by Academic Quality and Partnerships (AQP) on developing course and module learning outcomes that align to the correct Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ) level, as set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The Curriculum design step-by-step page of the Educational Enhancement website which explains more about the role of course learning outcomes within effective course design.

About learning outcomes

Learning outcomes (LOs) describe the broad knowledge, understanding, and skills that students will be able to demonstrate by the end of a course or module.

They also provide clarity for the teaching team, students, employers, and accrediting bodies.

Learning outcomes should be:

- **Student-centred: Focused on what learners will achieve rather than what instructors will teach.**
- **Measurable:** Clearly state observable actions or skills.
- **Achievable:** Realistic within the scope of the course.
- **Relevant:** LOs should align with course or module aims and discipline-specific needs

Also, as set out in the AQP guidance linked to from the top of this page, they should:

- Articulate the threshold pass expectation for a course or module
- Align to the QAA subject benchmark statements and be pitched at the right FHEQ level

Therefore:

- Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) should be expressed at the level of the award.
    - Level 6 awards should have 10-14 CLOs set at the level expected of students at the end of the programme.
    - Level 7 courses should have no more than 10.

- Module Learning Outcomes (MLOs) should align to the level of the module.
    - A 15-credit module should have 3-4 learning outcomes
    - A 30-credit module should have 5-6 learning outcomes.

Writing learning outcomes

It is important that course and module learning outcomes are:

- Consistent in how they are written: using a testable verb, object and context (see 'How to structure your learning outcomes' below).
- Student-centred: Focused on what learners will achieve rather than what instructors will teach.
- Measurable: Clearly state observable actions or skills.
- Achievable: Realistic within the scope of the course.
- Relevant: Aligned with course aims and discipline-specific needs

They should also AVOID:

- Using overly technical or academic language so they are understandable to prospective students.
- Describing specific assessments or modes of assessment, for example:
    - Avoid referring to oral communication or presentation skills in course or module LOs, instead refer, e.g. to the ability to communicate effectively with a given audience.
    - Avoid referring to 'projects' or 'dissertations', and instead refer to, e.g. 'sustained research' or 'sustained investigation'

Note that not describing specific assessments or modes of assessments makes it easier for students to meet your LOs in a variety of ways, making it easier to offer optionality and to provide reasonable adjustments.

How to structure your learning outcomes

To ensure consistency and clarity, learning outcomes should include three elements:

- A testable (assessable) action verb* (such as, 'Apply...')
- An object (such as, '...relevant critical theory...').
- A context/condition (for example, '...to an investigation related to media, film and/or music').

* Ideally, a learning outcome should begin with just ONE (assessable) verb, which aligns to the appropriate FHEQ level.

Differences between course and module learning outcomes

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) are broad and module learning outcomes (MLOs) are specific. The relationship is one of nesting: several MLOs add up to each CLO.

Course learning outcomes: breadth

CLOs describe what a student should be able to do by the end of the whole course. They are:

- **Broad in scope**, covering an integrated capability rather than a single topic or skill.
- **Pitched at a higher cognitive level**, typically analysing, synthesising, evaluating, or creating, because they represent the cumulative result of everything learned.
- **Stated in general terms**, so they stay stable even if specific content, readings, or tools change from year to year.
- **Few in number** relative to academic credits, because each one covers a lot of ground.
- **Assessed across the course**, at the level of the award
- Assessed more than once, to ensure they can all be met without compensation.

Module learning outcomes: specificity

MLOs describe what a student should be able to do after a particular unit of study. They are:

- **Narrow and focused**, tied to a specific topic, technique, or body of content.
- **More concrete and observable**, using precise verbs and naming the content or context involved.
- **Often pitched at a lower or intermediate level**, such as describing, applying, or comparing, since they build the foundations for the higher-level CLO.
- **More numerous**, relative to academic credits
- **Assessed within the module**, through summative assessments that are mapped against the LOs
- **Assessed only once**, to ensure students are not over assessed

How they relate

Each module, with its clearly defined MLOs, should map to at least one CLO. Each CLO should be supported by several modules. Think of the MLOs as the stepping stones and the CLO as the destination.

However, a CLO is not simply a sum of its parts. It describes expectations about how students should be able to integrate what they learned in individual modules.

Characteristic	**Course LOs**	**Module LOs**
Scope	Whole course	Single unit

Breadth	Broad, integrative	Narrow, topic-specific
Specificity	General wording	Precise, concrete wording
Cognitive level	Typically higher order	Often foundational to intermediate
Stability	Change rarely	Revised more often to align with content

A quick test

If an outcome could be satisfied by learning one topic, it is probably a module outcome. If achieving it requires drawing on work from across several modules, it is a course outcome.

A common drafting error is writing module outcomes that are as broad as course outcomes (so they cannot be assessed within the module) or course outcomes that are really just a list of topics (so they never ask for integration and they are pitched at too low a level).

Support with writing learning outcomes:

If reviewing or updating existing course or module learning outcomes, or drafting new ones, note that the Academic Developer or AQP Curriculum Manager for your Faculty are available to support.

You may also find it useful to use generative AI to help you. You can upload or copy this guidance to the AI tool and ask it to apply and suggest edits to your existing or draft learning outcomes.

Appendix 1: Example course learning outcomes

The examples below are Level 6 CLOs drawn from a range of discipline areas. They are divided into learning domains relating to the type of knowledge learners acquire and the cognitive processes they use (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001).

A full set of CLOs would, ideally, include LOs across a range of categories and/or domains.

Meta-cognitive (intellectual skills: the 'how' and 'why' of knowledge)

- Critically analyse [verb] complex information, concepts, and arguments [object] from a range of sources within the discipline [context/condition].
- Evaluate [verb] the quality, reliability, and limitations of evidence [object] when forming reasoned judgements on disciplinary questions [context/condition].
- Synthesise [verb] ideas, theories, and findings from different areas of the discipline [object] to construct coherent, well-supported arguments [context/condition].

- Synthesise [verb] complex philosophical arguments [object] in order to arrive at rational, evidence-based beliefs [context/condition].
- Apply [verb] disciplinary concepts and methods [object] to develop solutions to complex, unfamiliar problems, including where information is incomplete or contested [context/condition].
- Apply [verb] critical-thinking skills [object] to identify creative and innovative solutions to real world business problems [context/condition].
- Apply [verb] an integrated or systems approach [object] to the solution of complex problems [context/condition].
- Apply [verb] appropriate computational and analytical techniques [object] to model complex problems, recognising the limitations of the techniques employed [context/condition].
- Design [verb] solutions for complex problems [object] that meet a combination of societal, user, business and customer needs as appropriate [context/condition].
- Justify [verb] decisions and conclusions [object] by reasoning systematically through alternative perspectives and approaches [context/condition].
- Reflect critically [verb] on their own thinking, assumptions, and learning [object], and use this to refine their reasoning and practice [context/condition].

Cognitive (knowledge and understanding of the subject: the 'what')

- Apply [verb] fundamental laws and principles of physics [object] to analyse and explain complex physical systems across a range of contexts [context/condition].
- Evaluate [verb] recent developments in selected areas of physics [object], demonstrating awareness of current research and its limitations [context/condition].
- Analyse [verb] how film represents and constructs social identities, categories, and divisions [object] across global and historical contexts [context/condition].
- Evaluate [verb] the environmental and social impacts [object] of solutions to complex problems and minimise adverse effects [context/condition].

Affective (emotional, personal, professional skills)

- Apply [verb] an inclusive approach [object] to engineering practice and recognise the responsibilities, benefits and importance of supporting equality, diversity and inclusion [context/condition].
- Demonstrate [verb] professional integrity and ethical responsibility [object] in the conduct of research and practice [context/condition].

Psycho-motor (practical skills)

- Conduct [verb] practical laboratory work [object] safely [object] using a range of practical techniques relevant to biomedical science to test hypotheses [context/condition].
- Utilise [verb] digital tools and information literacy [object] to create, evaluate, and share knowledge in academic and professional settings [context/condition].

Interpersonal (communication, collaboration, conflict resolution)

- Communicate [verb] complex ideas [object] clearly, concisely and appropriately to a range of expert and non-expert audiences [context/condition].
- Contribute [verb] effectively to collaborative projects [object], demonstrating the ability to engage constructively with the views of others [context/condition].
- Negotiate [verb] and resolve differences of opinion [object] within a team to reach agreed outcomes [context/condition].

See also the Employability skills and learning outcomes section of the University of Sussex Embedding Employability and Entrepreneurship Toolkit.

Appendix 2: Example module learning outcomes

FHEQ Level 4

By the end of this module you should be able to…:

Describe [verb] the stages of the nursing process [object] when planning care for an adult patient on a hospital ward [context/condition].

Write [verb] Python functions [object] to solve routine data-processing problems in an introductory programming context [context/condition].

Identify [verb] primary and secondary sources [object] relevant to a research question on nineteenth-century British social reform [context/condition].

FHEQ Level 5

By the end of this module you should be able to…:

Analyse [verb] titration data [object] to determine the concentration of unknown solutions in an analytical laboratory setting [context/condition].

Compare [verb] the financial performance of two retail firms [object] using ratio analysis in a competitor benchmarking exercise [context/condition].

Interpret [verb] regression output [object] from a quantitative study of adolescent wellbeing in a research methods context [context/condition].

FHEQ Level 6

By the end of this module you should be able to…:

Evaluate [verb] the application of precedent in recent UK Supreme Court negligence judgments [object] within a tort law case study [context/condition].

Justify [verb] the selection of structural materials for a footbridge design [object] against safety and sustainability criteria [context/condition].

Critique [verb] inclusive teaching strategies [object] observed during a secondary school placement [context/condition].

FHEQ Level 7

By the end of this module you should be able to…:

Formulate [verb] a biodiversity monitoring strategy [object] for a restored wetland site under competing stakeholder demands [context/condition].

Critically evaluate [verb] the strength of competing evidence [object] on a vaccination intervention in a low-income country setting [context/condition].

Create [verb] an original interpretation of a twentieth-century work [object], justified through analytical and historical research, for a public recital [context/condition].

References:

Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing : a revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman.