

Principles and Policy for mapping learning outcomes of fields/courses onto modules

Introduction

- 1 This guidance describes how learning outcomes for fields and courses should be mapped onto the modules that make up the field/course. It also provides guidance on how assessment tasks relate to learning outcomes at both field/course level and within modules.
- 2 The University has deliberately adopted a policy that avoids a “reductionist” approach to mapping learning outcomes and has adopted a more “holistic” one. For example:
 - it is not expected that all field/course learning outcomes should be found in every module, but that they should each be found in at least one module where they are associated with a summative assessment
 - it is not expected that the University's core key skills outcomes, for example, will be delivered at the same level in every field/course (provided minimum expectations are reached)
 - within modules it is not expected that all module learning outcomes will have an associated summative assessment. The summative assessment may be in a later module in a sequence of modules that relate to each other as the core of a field/course. However, where there is no summative assessment there should be formative assessment and feedback to students on progress so that they can work towards a later summative assessment

Learning Outcomes

- 3 The University has agreed a standard definition of learning outcomes as follows:

“learning outcomes are statements of expected student achievements, abilities and skills at the end of a period of study in Higher Education. The expected outcomes may relate to a field as a whole, a level in a field or a single module.”
- 4 Learning outcomes have a number of purposes, for example:
 - they help curriculum designers articulate the expected outcomes of awards, levels and modules and consequently support the design of learning, teaching and assessment strategies to help students achieve the stated outcomes

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- they provide information for students to help them understand what is required of them in studying the curriculum and in being able to articulate what they have achieved after completing the curriculum
 - they provide information on the likely achievements of students who complete the study of a curriculum for employers, etc
 - they provide guidance on the structure of the curriculum and the way in which it is assessed for internal and external examiners and other external bodies
- 5 Higher Education in the UK is set in the context of threshold standards for assessments and also grading above thresholds for the honours degree and other qualifications. The situation is further complicated by the use of compensation and mitigation. Learning outcomes must therefore be set in the context of a range of student achievement.
- 6 Field/course and module designers need to be clear whether to expect a student on average to achieve all learning outcomes or whether to expect all students to achieve all stated learning outcomes at a minimum threshold level. Kingston University regulations currently favour the averaging approach (unless there are specific PSB requirements to the contrary).
- 7 Module designers also need to be clear about which learning outcomes in a module are summatively assessed and which are formatively assessed (in the latter case with feedback and summative assessment in a later module in a sequence).
- 8 Learning outcomes are associated with levels of achievement in HE in the Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ). In Kingston these are 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Learning outcomes are written to reflect the level expected. The University has adopted generic level descriptors which are consistent with the FHEQ, and has also published a staff guide to writing learning outcomes to reflect the appropriate level of module/award (see the ADC StaffSpace pages).
- 9 A common issue that regularly recurs in validations and reviews is that the learning outcomes do not reflect the expected level of achievement. How learning outcomes are delivered by related teaching and learning strategies and measured by appropriate assessment strategies is also not always clear. Further guidance in this area can be found at:
http://www.kingston.ac.uk/academic-development-centre/adc-publications/documents/writing_learning_outcomes.pdf
- 10 The National Student Survey (NSS) tells us that there are issues to address around assessment, and our own follow-up surveys indicate that students do not always understand (or may not be provided with) assessment/marking criteria. It is clear that a better understanding has to be based in clarity of learning outcomes, level descriptors, assessment criteria etc. For students to be able to track their own progress learning outcomes need to be clear and

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also where and when they can be achieved needs to be explained (Further guidance in this area can be found at:

http://www.kingston.ac.uk/academic-development-centre/adc-publications/documents/writing_learning_outcomes.pdf

- 11 Learning outcomes, whilst having a number of valuable uses, can also be misused. In particular:
- they can be presented at a level of detail that reduces higher education to a reductionist model where students simply tick boxes to demonstrate narrow achievement of overprescribed outcomes
 - they may be so directly linked to summative assessment that they narrow a student's vision and erode objectives of broader learning for its own sake, and student independence and initiative
 - they can create over-reliance on over-prescribed summative assessment to demonstrate outcomes which could equally be demonstrated by formative assessment or could be inherent in the curriculum with no direct assessment
 - in modular schemes it is often expected that all learning outcomes must be overtly demonstrated in the module concerned. However, in reality, prerequisite structures mean that demonstration of inherent learning outcomes in modules can take place later in summative assessment in subsequent modules
 - it is a fallacy that all overall level or field outcomes should be found in every module, but they should map onto the field as a whole. Even then, the mapping may not be 100% as students may be offered options etc
- 12 All of the above has led to the adoption of the following principles that should guide field/course and module design.

Kingston University Principles for the Use and Interpretation of Learning Outcomes

- 13 All learning outcomes should reflect as accurately as possible the level of achievement expected of students (*ie.* as detailed in the FHEQ and Kingston University generic level descriptions).
- 14 Learning outcome statements are normally produced to;
- describe the final outcome award in quite broad terms (see paragraph 15)
 - describe the most important outcomes of individual modules. Learning outcome descriptors are normally articulated for full, major, half and minor fields, but are not required for intermediate awards at undergraduate level (they should, however, be articulated at postgraduate level for PgCert, PgDip and Masters)
 - include the University's key skills requirements

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Field/course learning outcomes

15 Learning outcomes for fields/courses describe the outcomes expected of all students under the following broad headings (these are the headings within the University's Programme Specifications):

- knowledge and understanding
- cognitive (thinking) skills
- practical skills
- key skills

The categories of key skills are defined in the University's minimum key skills requirements. The other three categories are field specific and within them the individual outcomes should not be over-prescribed.

16 It is not expected that field learning outcomes will be mirrored in individual module outcomes. However, it should be possible to show that all students who have studied the field will have achieved the learning outcomes as listed in the programme specification. Normally, therefore, this will require that there is some form of summative assessment linked to each learning outcome in one or more modules that make up the field

Note: there is not necessarily a one to one relationship between field learning outcomes and summative assessment as achievement of a learning outcome may be assessed in stages and one assessment may measure achievement of more than one learning outcome.

17 Field learning outcomes may also be developed in modules without summative assessment in those particular modules (there may just be formative assessment and feedback on progress). The summative assessment may take place at the end of a sequence of modules linked by pre-requisites (see paragraph 21).

18 It is not expected that all overall field outcomes should be achieved at the highest level within the award concerned. For example, in the Honours Degree some learning outcomes may be specified at levels 4 or 5 and the map should indicate assessment at these levels. Normally, however, most learning outcomes are specified at the award outcome level.

Module learning outcomes

19 Module learning outcomes should not be over-prescribed. Typically a 15 credit module might have up to five or six outcomes at most and often a smaller number.

20 The stated learning outcomes in a module should be written to reflect as accurately as possible the level of the module.

21 The University does not expect all learning outcomes in an individual module to have associated summative assessments. Normally, some learning

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outcomes are assessed summatively as credit is not awarded unless outcomes have been demonstrably achieved. Other learning outcomes may be associated with formative assessment. Some may be inherent in the module without directly associated assessment or be an integral part of other assessments. Some may not be assessed but be a general expectation of students to be independent, to use their own initiative, to show a general interest in their subject. (In such cases, the learning outcomes may be demonstrated elsewhere in the course, students demonstrating better grades, higher classification etc. later in their course).

Note: this approach also avoids assessment overload that can occur if a large number of learning outcomes are summatively assessed. A large number of assessments can lead to regression towards the mean in module marks. A small number of well designed assessments (formative and/or summative) can discriminate across the grade range more effectively. One assessment, well designed, can measure achievement of a number of outcomes. In such cases assessment criteria should relate to the different outcomes. Not all criteria need to be associated with a mark or grade e.g. it might be a requirement to submit a piece of work by email to show ICT competence, attend to gain practical work marks etc (marks are not awarded for attendance per se).

- 22 The more holistic approach to module learning outcomes in contributing to overall field outcomes is an essential feature of the University's approach *ie.* achievement of field outcomes by students is the central feature. The approach to module learning outcomes preserves the key features of higher education associated with fostering a level of learning for its own sake, independence, initiative and intellectual development and challenge.

Relationship of field learning outcomes and associate assessments to modules

- 23 Overall, therefore, it should be possible to map the relationship of field learning outcomes and associated assessments to modules. This map should be provided in programme specifications. The map is designed to show where the field/course learning outcomes are assessed formatively and summatively in modules. In the modules flagged as delivering the outcomes concerned there should be associated module learning outcomes and formative and/or summative assessments. Every field/course learning outcome should be associated with at least one summative assessment in the map.