

Education Quality and Policy Office**Guidance**

Title	Guidance on Learning Aims and Outcomes
Purpose	This guidance outlines what is meant by the terms 'aims' and 'learning outcomes' and how they relate to course delivery and assessment.
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Date of implementation	1 October 2023
Date of review	When required
Version	V1.0 final

Guidance on Learning Aims and Outcomes

This guidance outlines what is meant by the terms 'aims' and 'learning outcomes' and how they relate to course delivery and assessment. This guidance is intended to help faculties and departments in the development and modification of courses.

CONTENTS

1. Educational aims versus learning outcomes	3
2. Educational aims	3
Why articulate aims?	3
At what level should aims be set?	3
Example.....	4
3. Learning outcomes	4
Why articulate learning outcomes?	5
At what level should learning outcomes be set?	5
Learning outcomes and transferable skills	5
Example.....	5
4. Achieving and reviewing educational aims and learning outcomes	6

1. Educational aims versus learning outcomes

Educational aims represent the intentions of the teacher in delivering the course of study. Learning outcomes describe the achievements of the learner in completing the course. Together, they provide a clear indication of the curriculum for the course and what students can expect.

Both are necessary and have different purposes within course documentation and quality assurance. This document outlines the structure and purpose for each, where they are used, and how they can be clearly articulated. The Education Quality and Policy Office and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning can offer bespoke guidance on educational aims and learning outcomes.

2. Educational aims

Clearly defined educational aims should:

- encapsulate the **purpose** of the course and what the institution is trying to achieve in providing it;
- indicate the **audience** for whom the course is intended, or the kind of career or future study for which it might be designed;
- state whether the course is broad-based or taught as a series of specialised options, and explain the **rationale**. It is the kind of statement that might go into a prospectus to advertise the course.

Why articulate aims?

Clearly articulated aims enable the institution, prospective students, potential employers, and the outside world to understand the purpose and objectives of a course.

They:

- enable prospective students, their advisers, and External Examiners to understand the **ethos and purpose** of the course;
- provide the institution and internal review committees with a **benchmark** against which to consider whether courses are meeting their purpose;
- represent the **intentions of the teacher**.

At what level should aims be set?

Aims can be set at any level: for the entire award (e.g., Tripos, MPhil or MSt), a part of the award (e.g., pathway or Part), or a major subdivision such as a module, option or paper. In the publicly available programme specifications, they are normally given at the level of the award.

Internally, institutions may think it useful to articulate aims at other levels, and individuals may wish to set out the aims for their own courses. Where educational

aims are set at multiple levels (for example, at the level of award as well as individual modules) these should remain consistent.

Example

"The Journalism Tripos is a three year course which is designed to provide students with a thorough grounding in all major fields of journalistic knowledge. It offers the opportunity in the second year to undertake a field project in a national or international media organisation, and in the third to specialise in an area of journalism on which the department has significant research strength. Depending on the exact route taken through the course, it aims to prepare students for careers in the media professions, teaching, and research, while also remaining broad-based enough to enable graduates to enter a variety of careers unrelated to journalism. It aims to provide not only subject-related knowledge skills but also research, study and personal skills."

This describes the aims of a large area of provision (a Tripos) which are expressed in broad and general terms; the smaller the unit of teaching provision, the more specific the aims are likely to become.

3. Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes tell students and prospective students the kinds of **knowledge and skills** that they will be given the opportunity to acquire during the course.

Learning outcomes are:

- usually written in the form *"At the end of the course students will be expected to have..."*, so as to be **clear to students**;
- expected to reflect the **requirements of the level of study**, as outlined in the [Sector Recognised Standards](#) defined by the Office for Students;
- expected to reflect any internal and external **reference points** that may be applicable; for example, a professional body may require the acquisition of certain knowledge in order to accredit a course, or the national [Subject Benchmark Statement](#) may give advice about the kinds of skills a student of that course would be expected to have;
- **publicised** to students in programme specifications, prospectus material, and course materials;
- taken into account when designing the **assessment** for a course, ensuring that the mode chosen is appropriate for the learning outcome; articulating the learning outcomes should also allow appropriate **marking criteria** to be drawn up, and give examiners and students insight into those criteria as they are applied to specific assessments.

Individual teachers will also be able to articulate the learning outcomes for specific lecture courses. These will normally be publicised to students through course materials.

Why articulate learning outcomes?

Drawing up and articulating learning outcomes:

- promotes the development of a coherent learning programme;
- helps to guide students through the programme;
- enables an institution to demonstrate how a particular lecture course or paper contributes to the overall aims of its teaching;
- enables students to assess the ways in which their teaching contributes to their learning.

At what level should learning outcomes be set?

As with educational aims, learning outcomes can be set at any level (for example, at the level of award as well as individual modules). In the publicly available programme specifications, they are normally given at the level of the award.

However, it is strongly recommended that learning outcomes be articulated at all levels of a course, and not only at the level of award. This helps students identify how the teaching they receive integrates into a coherent whole. It also aids in mapping assessment tasks against the anticipated learning, and shows how students demonstrate their achievements throughout the course.

Where learning outcomes are set at multiple levels they should remain consistent.

Learning outcomes and transferable skills

The University encourages students to acquire transferable skills, and the General Board expects faculties, departments, and Colleges to provide opportunities for students to acquire these skills. When designing courses, institutions are expected to bear the importance of such skills in mind, though University policy does not require them to be formally or directly assessed. It is, however, recommended that transferable skills are articulated within the learning outcomes of the course.

Example

"At the end of the first year, students taking the Biology option will be expected to have:

- *acquired a **general knowledge** of the principles and mechanisms underlying cell biology, animal physiology, genetics, ecology, animal behaviour, reproduction and development;*
- *acquired a **basic knowledge** of physics and chemistry sufficient to understand the physical and chemical bases of biological subjects taught in the course;*
- *acquired the ability to use mathematical and statistical **techniques relevant** to the biological subjects taught;*
- *carried out **practical work** related to the biological subjects above, and produced word-processed **reports** of that work;*

- *spent a minimum of 4 days on supervised **field trips** in the local area, becoming familiar with the ecology and climate of the area and with the procedures and equipment used for ecological investigation;*
- *spent a minimum of one week on **placement** in a local school, company or commercial laboratory shadowing personnel engaged in biological teaching or research and appreciated the day-to-day planning and time-management required for such activities;*
- *given one **presentation** in a seminar of peers, including the use of visual aids;*
- *acquired the skills to use **library and internet resources** independently."*

Again, the smaller the unit of teaching provision, the more specific the learning outcomes are likely to be.

4. Achieving and reviewing educational aims and learning outcomes

An institution will want to know whether a course's educational aims and learning outcomes are being achieved, and are still fit for purpose. This will be apparent from the results of assessment and reports of External Examiners. Learning outcomes should also be reviewed within Education Monitoring and Review or other quality assurance exercises.

Many institutions review Tripos results or other statistics annually to determine trends in achievement, and whether they require further investigation. This, coupled with student feedback, may enable institutions to assess whether the learning outcomes are appropriate, and allow consideration of increased support or revision of the course.

Faculties and departments have access to various kinds of data about their students and courses, some of which is published by the University via the [Information Hub](#).

Institutions may also have in-house data, such as level of use of facilities, as well as detailed information about Tripos or MPhil results. **Care should always be exercised in retaining data** for statistical purposes so that the provisions of the Data Protection Act are not infringed. Guidance on this can be obtained from the University's [Information Compliance Office](#).