‘Learning Outcomes and Level Descriptions’
Wednesday 23rd October 2013,
12.30-2.00pm

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University Learning and Teaching Fellow
Session aims

- To define the relationships between:
  - National reference points (generic qualification and level descriptors and subject benchmark statements) and the writing of programme aims and learning outcomes
  - Programme and module learning outcomes
  - Module learning outcomes and assessment strategies
  - Module assessment strategies and assessment (marking) criteria (‘constructive alignment’, Biggs 1996)

- To identify sources of guidance for the writing of programme and module learning outcomes

- To consider principles for the development of effective assessment criteria
Part One

The national reference points for curriculum design
UK Quality Code for HE

• Defined by a national HE level framework and subject benchmarks (PART A), additional guidance on securing and enhancing the quality of students’ learning opportunities (PART B) and guidance concerning information published by HE providers (PART C)

• All three Parts of the Code are used at six-yearly QAA Higher Education Review to inform judgements on academic standards, quality, enhancement and public information
Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards
A1: UK and European reference points for academic standards
A2: Degree-awarding bodies' reference points for academic standards
A3: Securing academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to academic awards

Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality
B1: Programme design and approval
B2: Admissions
B3: Learning and teaching
B4: Enabling student development and achievement
B5: Student engagement
B6: Assessment of students and recognition of prior learning
B7: External examining
B8: Programme monitoring and review
B9: Academic appeals and student complaints
B10: Managing HE provision with others
B11: Research degrees

Part C: Information about higher education provision
UKQC Part ‘A’

• Deals with the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards:
  – Threshold standards = the MINIMUM level of achievement that a student has to reach to achieve a UK HE award - however, awarding institutions may set their own threshold higher than the national threshold
  – Classification beyond threshold is a matter for institutions
  – External examiners judge whether threshold standards are being achieved and comment on comparability of standards beyond the threshold
Threshold standards are defined during programme design and confirmed at validation through evidence of course teams’ engagement with:

- The national qualifications framework (generic)
- Subject benchmark statements (specific)

These are used together to develop programme learning outcomes of the appropriate level and content (in respect of subject knowledge and understanding, and intellectual/practical/transferable skills)
## Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Certificate (C) level</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Certificates of higher education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (I) level</td>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>Foundation degrees, ordinary (bachelor) degrees, diplomas of higher education, HNC/Ds and other higher diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honours (H) level</td>
<td>Level 6</td>
<td>Bachelor's degrees with honours, graduate certificates and graduate diplomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master's (M) level</td>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>Master's degrees, postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas</td>
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<td>Doctoral (D) level</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>MPhil, PhD including professional doctorates</td>
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Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6:
Bachelor's degree with honours

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any bachelor's degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 6 qualifications, including bachelor’s degrees, graduate diplomas and so on.

Bachelor's degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline

- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline

- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or
  - equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline

- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge

- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).
Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects

- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem

- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
  - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.
Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements and to communicate them effectively.

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.
“Premised on the concept of intended learning outcomes (statements of what the student is expected to know, understand and be able to do) which are approved by the HE awarding body for individual modules/units, and for programmes as a whole”

Credit levels are typically aligned to the levels of the FHEQ

Credit level descriptors = “guides that identify the relative complexity, intellectual challenge, depth of learning and learner autonomy expected at each level and the differences between the levels”
‘NICATS’ Summary level descriptors

Level 4

• Develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

Level 5

• Generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well-defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.
‘NICATS’ Summary level descriptors (contd)

Level 6

• Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilising specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes

Level 7

• Display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision making, including use of supervision
Some key level characteristics/differentiators

**Level 4:** Interpretation and evaluation of knowledge; structured communication and coherent argument

**Level 5:** Critical understanding, analysis and evaluation of knowledge; application of knowledge outside its original context; communication and argument in a variety of forms

**Level 6:** Systematic and critical understanding, analysis and evaluation of detailed knowledge, some of it leading; ability to make and sustain arguments, make judgements and propose solutions; self-managed learning

**Level 7:** Systematic understanding of knowledge, critical awareness and evaluation of current and complex issues and developments; comprehensive understanding of research techniques; original application of knowledge, making sound judgements and proposing new hypotheses; self-direction and autonomous working
Subject Benchmark Statements

- Developed by panels of academic subject experts convened by QAA
  - Subject benchmark statements for undergraduate honours degrees (58 subjects)
  - Masters degree benchmark statements (13 subjects)
  - NHS/ DoH degree benchmark statements (18 subjects)
Subject knowledge

3.1 English incorporates different types of degree programmes with distinctive configurations. While the emphasis given to particular aspects of subject knowledge will vary from institution to institution and from programme to programme, graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree should, as appropriate, be able to demonstrate:

- knowledge of literature and language, which in the case of literature should include a substantial number of authors and texts from different periods of literary history. For single honours literature students this should include knowledge of writing from periods before 1800; for single honours language students this should include a broad knowledge of the history and development of the English language

- knowledge and understanding of the distinctive character of texts written in the principal literary genres, fiction, poetry and drama, and of other kinds of writing and communication

- experience of the range of literatures in English and of regional and global varieties of the English language

- knowledge of the structure, levels and discourse functions of the English language

- appreciation of the power of imagination in literary creation

- awareness of the role of critical traditions in shaping literary history
- knowledge of linguistic, literary, cultural and socio-historical contexts in which literature is written and read
- knowledge of the relationship between literature and other media including, where appropriate, film, or other forms of cultural production
- knowledge of useful and precise critical terminology and, where appropriate, linguistic and stylistic terminology
- awareness of the range and variety of approaches to literary study, which may include creative practice, performance, and extensive specialisation in critical and/or linguistic theory
- awareness of how literature and language produce and reflect cultural change and difference
- recognition of the multi-faceted nature of the discipline, and of its complex relationship to other disciplines and forms of knowledge.

Subject-specific skills

3.2 Graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will have acquired a range of complementary literary, linguistic and critical skills. Individual degree programmes will choose to place the emphasis on developing particular abilities and skills. The following subject-specific skills are intended to provide a broad framework for articulating the outcomes of individual programmes:

- critical skills in the close reading, description, analysis, or production of texts or discourses
- ability to articulate knowledge and understanding of texts, concepts and theories relating to English studies
- sensitivity to generic conventions and to the shaping effects upon communication of circumstances, authorship, textual production and intended audience
- responsiveness to the central role of language in the creation of meaning and a sensitivity to the affective power of language
- rhetorical skills of effective communication and argument, both oral and written
- command of a broad range of vocabulary and an appropriate critical terminology
- bibliographic skills appropriate to the discipline, including accurate citation of sources and consistent use of conventions in the presentation of scholarly work
- awareness of how different social and cultural contexts affect the nature of language and meaning
- understanding of how cultural norms and assumptions influence questions of judgement
- comprehension of the complex nature of literary languages, and an awareness of the relevant research by which they may be better understood.

**Generic and graduate skills**

3.3 English graduates will be able to relate specific analyses to a general picture and understand particular issues in their widest application. The key transferable and cognitive skills which English graduates should possess, and which make them attractive to employers, are:

- advanced literacy and communication skills and the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts, including the ability to present sustained and persuasive written and oral arguments cogently and coherently
- the capacity to analyse and critically examine diverse forms of discourse
- ability to engage in processes of drafting and redrafting texts to achieve clarity of expression and an appropriate style
- the capacity to adapt and transfer the critical methods of the discipline to a variety of working environments
- the ability to acquire substantial quantities of complex information of diverse kinds in a structured and systematic way involving the use of the distinctive interpretative skills of the subject
- competence in the planning and execution of essays, presentations, and other writing and project work
- the capacity for independent thought and judgement demonstrated through critical or creative practice
- skills in critical reasoning and analysis
- the ability to comprehend and develop intricate concepts in an open-ended way which involves an understanding of purpose and consequences
- the ability to work with and in relation to others through the presentation of ideas and information and the collective negotiation of solutions
- the ability to understand, interrogate and apply a variety of theoretical positions and weigh the importance of alternative perspectives
- the ability to handle information and argument in a critical and self-reflective manner
- research skills, including the ability to gather, sift and organise material independently and critically, and evaluate its significance
- information technology (IT) skills broadly understood and the ability to access, work with and evaluate electronic resources (such as hypertext, conferencing, e-publishing, blogs and wikis)
- time management and organisational skills, as shown by the ability to plan and present conclusions effectively.
Part Two

Using the national reference points in programme design
Programme aims

• “General statements of educational intent, seen from the student’s point of view” (Ramsden, 1992) – tested at EHU validation

• The statements should outline the broad purpose of the programme in, for example, enabling students to learn; meeting local, national and international needs, including widening participation; development of graduate attributes and preparing students for employment by promoting key and transferable skills; and preparing students for further (postgraduate) study
11. Programme Aims

Business and Management Degree

1. To provide students with the opportunity to progressively develop knowledge and understanding of a number of key areas of business and management and the external and internal environment in which managers operate.

2. To produce graduates with the knowledge, practical experience and skills to be able to operate effectively in business and management settings.

3. To develop the ability of students to analyse and evaluate major principles, theories and concepts that inform and underpin current business management practice.

4. To enable students to achieve progression through the operational, tactical and strategic application of business and management concepts and applications.

5. To enable students to develop knowledge and a range of interpersonal, transferable and employability skills to enhance their capacity to find employment in a range of contexts.

6. To equip students with research skills to be able to build on the knowledge and experience gained from the programme.

7. To encourage and enable students to become reflective and autonomous learners and to develop the ability for learning to learn.

8. To provide students with a platform from which they may enter post-graduate study in related areas.
Programme learning outcomes

• “Specific and concrete statements of what students are expected to learn” (Ramsden, 1992) – and what teachers should be helping them to achieve
• Derived from the Programme Aims and tested at EHU validation
• Differentiated by level and presented under the headings of:
  – Knowledge and Understanding (subject-specific);
  – Intellectual Skills (generic cognitive skills including conceptualisation and critical thinking, problem solving, research and enquiry, synthesis and creativity, analysis and evaluation);
  – Practical Skills (subject-specific and including professional skills and attributes with an employability focus);
  – Transferable Skills (key generic skills of personal evaluation and development and interpersonal and communication skills, also with an employability focus).
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<thead>
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<th>Knowledge and Understanding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apply concepts of strategic management in complex situations</td>
<td>BUS3000, BUS3003, BUS3004, BUS3007, BUS3008,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate an holistic approach to the analysis of business problems</td>
<td>BUS3000, BUS3001, BUS3005, BUS3006,</td>
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<td>Evaluate different approaches to decision making</td>
<td>BUS3000, BUS3005, BUS3008,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyse complex situations and develop conclusions based on theoretical concepts</td>
<td>BUS3000, BUS3001, BUS3002, BUS3007, BUS3008, BUS3010,</td>
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<td>Develop a critical approach to the evaluation of argument</td>
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<td>Analyse, evaluate and interpret complex quantitative and qualitative data</td>
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<td>Undertake an individual research project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design and implement a data collection strategy</td>
<td>BUS3001, BUS3004, BUS3005,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyse, synthesise and summarise data using appropriate methods and develop appropriate conclusions</td>
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<td>Demonstrate a critically reflective approach to work</td>
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<td>Utilise project management skills in undertaking a piece of business or management research</td>
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Programme learning outcomes, contd

• Mapping of modules to programme learning outcomes at validation ensures that all PLOs can be met by every student – “Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit” (UK Quality Code Chapter B6)

• Each PLO should ideally be achievable through completion of more than one module – this provides some safeguard against individual module failure or condonement

• Mapping of optional modules (‘electives’) to PLOs requires particular care
Module learning outcomes

- Like PLOs, Module learning outcomes (MLOs) should reflect the national level descriptors (tested at validation)

Some typical questions from course developers:
- What is the optimum number of MLOs?
- Should they be differentiated between ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’?
- Should practical (PSRB) competencies be reflected within or outwith MLOs?

Some typical issues raised by validation panels:
- Too many MLOs (for the credit volume of the module where 1 credit = 10 notional learning hours)
- MLOs may not be capable of being tested, e.g. ‘Students will know and understand’ (passive) is less helpful than ‘Students will demonstrate knowledge and understanding’ (active)
- MLOs may not be expressed at the appropriate level, e.g. use of ‘describe’ is not usually appropriate beyond Level 4
Bloom’s Taxonomy

- Bloom’s ‘Taxonomy of Educational Objectives’ (1956 but since updated by several scholars) – describes different levels of cognitive learning:
  - Knowledge (basic)
  - Comprehension
  - Application
  - Analysis
  - Synthesis
  - Evaluation (advanced)

- Includes a list of useful verbs to accompany each level...
Module assessment strategy

• Module assessment strategies should be mapped to the MLOs e.g. assessment task 1 tests MLOs 1 & 2, etc.
• Tasks are expressed under the three Key Information Set (KIS) headings of:
  • Coursework - Written assignment, including essay; report; dissertation; portfolio; output from project work (often of a practical nature which could be a performance, piece of artwork, new product or poster); set exercises and class tests (except exercises conducted under exam conditions and practical skills tests)
  • Written examination - Including ‘seen’, ‘unseen’ and ‘open-book’ exams
  • Practical - Oral assessment and presentation including vivas; practical skills assessment e.g. clinical skills, laboratory techniques, identification of/ commentary on artwork, surveying skills, language translation or listening comprehension, etc.
Module assessment strategy (contd)

• Module assessment tasks are weighted as a proportion of the summative assessment, e.g. ‘Task 1’ = 60% and ‘Task 2’ = 40% of the total module grade

• Some tasks may be wholly formative while others may carry a requirement to pass but do not contribute to the summative grade, e.g. ‘Task 3 = Pass/fail only = 0% weighting’

• Under EHU’s Academic Regulations students are permitted to fail one or more assessment tasks within a module as long as they achieve an aggregate pass mark of 40 from the remaining assessment (although course teams may stipulate a pass requirement for all assessment tasks at validation, often to meet specific PSRB requirements)
Module assessment strategy (contd)

- Typical questions arising from validation:
  - Can/should a MLO be tested more than once within a module?
  - Is there a University-wide tariff for assessment volume, e.g. 2,000 words for a 20 credit module at Level 4?
  - Should there be volume (wordage) equivalence in the assessment of modules of the same programme at the same level?
Assessment (marking) criteria

• Module learning outcomes only describe student achievement at threshold (pass) level – to enable grading we use separate assessment (marking) criteria

• There is no requirement (currently) to supply these at validation – however, they must be published to students at the start of every module and:
  – Be transparent and easily understood by students (for their development)
  – Be at the correct level, i.e. in relation to the level descriptors - for example, students should not be penalised for failing to undertake critical analysis at Level 4 (although they may be rewarded for doing so)
  – Be tailored to the particular type of assessment task, e.g. an essay will require a different set of marking criteria from a practical project or a presentation
Marking criteria (cont)

• Differentiated between ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’
• Differentiation within the First Class Band, i.e. separate criteria for 70-79%, 80-89% and 90-100% are now generally regarded as good practice

• **Questions asked by course developers:**
  – Should a specific proportion of marks be reserved for meeting different criteria, e.g. 50% of marks available for demonstration of knowledge, 20% for use of sources, 20% for structured argument and 10% for referencing and syntax?
‘Constructive alignment’

- National level descriptors (generic)
- Subject Benchmark Statements
- Programme Learning Outcomes
- Module Learning Outcomes
  - Assessment tasks
  - Marking criteria
Questions for course developers

• Are the PLOs and MLOs aligned with the national level descriptors and subject benchmarks?
• Are the MLOs mapped to the PLOs such that every student will be able to achieve the latter?
• Are the module assessment strategies appropriate for testing the MLOs?
• Do we want students to pass every assessment task in a module? (this will require specific justification at validation)
• Do the marking criteria clearly differentiate levels of achievement beyond ‘threshold’?
Further reading

• Framework for Higher Education Qualifications,
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQ08.pdf

• QAA NICATS level descriptors:
  – Summary:
    http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/creditframework.pdf
  – Full:
    http://www.nicats.ac.uk/about/prn_tlevl_descriptors.pdf

• Subject benchmark statements, QAA
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Honours-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx


Further reading (contd)