University of Central Asia – School of Arts and Science
Course Description and Learning Outcomes Review

Course Description

A course description outlines for the students the rationale for the course. It is a brief summary of the course that describes the highlights of the course.

- Does the course descriptions reflect how the students would benefit from taking the course?
- Is it written in the present tense?
- Is it clear, concise and easy to understand?
- Is it focused on what is done in the course (not on a list of topics)?

Learning Outcomes

Course learning outcomes describe what a student will be able to do, know and think about at the end of the course. The emphasis of the outcome is on what the student will learn during the semester. Using a taxonomy of learning, such as Bloom's Taxonomy, each learning outcome begins with a verb that can be measured.

As you develop or revise learning outcomes – here are some questions to reflect on:

- Why is the course important? What purpose does this course serve?
- What do you want students to be able to do/know once the course is over?
- What is the profile of the course? How does it relate to other courses? Are there any courses that this course builds on?
- If a colleague asked you why you chose these learning outcomes for this specific course, what would be the rationale for your decision?

As you write each outcome, make sure that they are SMART:

Specific	• Are clear and precise
Measurable	• Can be measured through assessments
Achievable	• The learning is achievable based on the prior knowledge of the students/ pre-requisites of the course
Relevant	• It is relevant in relation to the program/course description and field/discipline
Time-limited	• The amount of work required can be achieved within the time available in the semester

A SMART learning outcome:

- Is written from the perspective of what the learner will be able to do, not what the professor does
- Begins with ONE action verb from a taxonomy of learning
- Can be measured — by an assignment, test, project, exam
- Never begins with vague verbs such as 'know' 'appreciate' 'understand' and 'demonstrate' (*see note about this at the end of this Tip Sheet*)
- Is free of ambiguous words and phrases such as *"critically"* examine
- Does not dictate teaching strategies, activities nor assessment (there should be a number of ways to achieve the outcome)

Typically a course would have about 5-7 outcomes.

Writing Learning Outcome Statements

There are three parts to every learning outcome statement:

1. An **action verb (only ONE)** that identifies the performance to be demonstrated and the level of learning using a Taxonomy of learning such as [Bloom's Taxonomy](#) .

2. The **content** or learning focus that specifies what knowledge, concept or skill that the learner is expected to acquire (learn)

3. The **context** or criteria that specifies the parameters, the measurable characteristics, in which the learning is grounded

When writing outcomes ask these 4 questions about each outcome:

- Is there a "specific" focus for the learning?
- Can it be measured?
- Can it be achieved based on the pre-requisite knowledge/skills of the learners?
- Can it be achieved in the length of time available to teach/practice what is required?

Example – At the end of this Learning Outcomes workshop you will be able to:

Action Verb	Content/Process – the focus of Learning	Context
One verb– e. g identify, create, explain,	*What will the learning focus on? This part of the statement specifies the learning to be demonstrated (the what).*	*What is the context of the learning? This describes the why/what for?)*
Explain	the reasons why verbs such as "understand" and "appreciate"	are not used in a learning outcome
Write	learning outcome statements	that are SMART

Common Problems with Learning Outcomes

The most common problem with learning outcomes is that they begin with verbs that are not measurable. In order to be able to assess a learning outcome, they must specify learning tasks that can be observed and not activities or states that are internal to students' minds. Potter and Kustra (2012) identify the Sinister Sixteen verbs – verbs that are passive, internal and/or otherwise unobservable – that are very common in learning outcomes and are all unacceptable.

The Sinister Sixteen Verbs

understand	know	be aware of	value
appreciate	see	be conscious of	get
comprehend	accept	Learn	apprehend
grasp	have knowledge of	Perceive	be familiar with

All of these are internal processes. In other words, they aren't public and can't be observed. You can never really know whether someone understands a concept because you can't see into the person's mind. All we can assess are behaviours that we are willing to accept as evidence of understanding.

Other problems include:

Too vague – it cannot be measured	Too specific	Use of ambiguous words and phrases
Too many learning outcomes	Too many verbs in one learning outcome	Same (usually vague) verb is repeated
Learning outcomes that specify the assessment	Not realistic to achieve the level of learning described	Learning outcomes that only describe the subject content

Aligning Outcomes and Assessments

Once the outcomes are determined then the assessments have to be designed so that they effectively allow students to show that they are able to know/think/do what is described in the course outcomes. The assessments should show how well students have learned what we want them to learn. It is recommended that you create a simple assessment map that shows which assessments are aligned with each outcome.

Additional resources are available on request.