

Student Workload and Learning Outcomes

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The learning outcome of a programme or a course unit **is not**

the body of knowledge the applicant has accumulated

but rather

the understanding, skills and competences which are intended to result from the student's studies

There can be no full account of learning outcomes without outcomes which are specific in terms of both (1) level and (2), but there are learning outcomes which are *generic for something which can properly be called “Higher Education”*.

Broadly, these are:

- the capacity to learn independently;
- an intellectual understanding of what is and has been learned;
- independent judgment;
- an inquiring approach;
- objective analysis and the construction of rational argument;
- problem solving skills and creativity;
- humane values;
- critical self-awareness;
- the ability to communicate ideas and act upon them appropriately.

(1) There are **general learning outcomes** which are progressively being identified to describe *the level of academic awards* which conform to Bologna.

(The “Dublin Descriptors” are now being regarded as a basis for the *further development* of these.)

(2) There are also specific learning outcomes which are considered appropriate for the achieving the level of the general descriptors through a programme of study in *a particular subject*.

(E.g. the UK ‘subject benchmark’ statements published by the QAA.)

These should be consistent with (1)

(3) There are then the learning outcomes which are defined for *a particular programme of studies* (which may be in a combination of subjects).

These should be consistent with (1) and (2). They may include learning outcomes which are specific to particular employment (e.g. whatever knowledge and competencies are considered necessary for someone to practice as a lawyer in Croatia)

(4) *Each study unit* in a programme of studies should have its own learning outcomes defined as the criteria for a student's success in that unit.

In combination they should represent the achievement of (3), i.e. the intended learning outcomes of the programme of studies as a whole.

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Dublin Descriptors

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (firstly):*

Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that

builds upon [the level of] their general secondary education, and

is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study.

Dublin Descriptors

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (secondly):*

Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates *a professional* approach to their work or vocation*, and

have competence typically demonstrated through *devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems* within their field of study.

*The word ‘**professional**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile / specification.

Dublin Descriptors

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (thirdly):*

*Have the ability to **gather and interpret relevant data** (usually within their field of study)*

*to inform **judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues.***

Dublin Descriptors

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (fourthly):*

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

Dublin Descriptors

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (fifthly and finally):*

Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

Extracted from the ‘subject benchmark statement’ produced for BA degrees in History in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Students should undertake programmes which foster and inculcate the following skills and qualities:

- i. The ability to understand how people have existed, acted and thought in the always different context of the past...
- ii. The ability to read and use texts and other source materials, both critically and empathetically, while addressing questions of genre, content, perspective and purpose.
- iii. The appreciation of the complexity and diversity of situations, events and past mentalities....
- iv. The understanding of the problems inherent in the historical record itself....

Extracted from the 'subject benchmark statement' produced for BA degrees in History in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Students should undertake programmes which [also] foster and inculcate the following skills and qualities:

- v. Basic critical skills: a recognition that statements are not all of equal validity, that there are ways of testing them, and that historians operate by rules of evidence which, though themselves subject to critical evaluation, are also a component of intellectual integrity and maturity.
- vi. Intellectual independence: a [first cycle] History programme should incorporate the general skills of [historical research] It should develop an understanding of the nature of the discipline including what questions are asked by historians, and why.
- vii. Marshalling of argument - in written and oral form drawing on and presenting all the above skills.....

The learning outcomes defined for a programme of studies as a whole *must be capable of being achieved by any of those who are admitted as students.*

It therefore very important to take account of the body of knowledge, understanding, competences, capacities and commitment which are required for entry to the programme.

A fuller account of what a first cycle academic award represents than that provided by the Bologna Declaration would include reference to the stage in his or her educational development at which the student enters Higher Education.

This is a crucial factor in the choice between three or four years as the length of a full-time programme of study, and it is important that the Croatian *matura* which is being developed provides an appropriate benchmark.

The learning outcomes defined for the units taken beyond the first semester of a programme of studies should take account of the knowledge, understanding, competences and capacities which will have been developed by the units which the student will have been required to complete previously.

I.e. the **prerequisites**.

The learning outcomes of an individual course unit will be effectively achieved (or not) through:

- the abilities and capacities required for entry to the programme of studies;
- the knowledge and understanding with which the student enters the course unit;
- the course unit's syllabus;
- the teaching and other forms of learning support, including support for independent study; and
- *the time available to the student for mastering the course unit (the student workload).*

As well, of course, as the diligence of the student.

The number of ECTS credits allocated to a study unit indicates a judgement which has been made by those responsible for the programme of studies on **the total time which a student taking the unit will need to achieve and be assessed in the learning outcomes defined for the unit.**

There is no European standard for the number of hours per week, or weeks per year, for which a student should be expected to study, but the trend in Europe is towards around 1,500 hours per year becoming the norm.

This would mean that, for example, an allocation of 10 ECTS credits means that it is judged that the student will need 250 hours of study to achieve and be assessed in the unit's learning outcomes.

The judgement on what can be regarded as the appropriate workload will probably begin as a fairly crude estimation, although one which is helped by consultation with any students who have already experience of the unit and the extent to which the staff concerned have experience of students' learning capacities, including their recollection of their own experience as students.

The key to good curriculum design is to put oneself in the student's place.

There should then be a process of further refinement in the light of a monitoring of the actual experience of students studying the unit.

The “Tuning” project has been testing two model pro-formas: one for the teacher to use in determining notional student workload for a planned unit, the other a questionnaire for students to indicate actual workload as a cross-checking mechanism.

It is important to *distinguish between learning which involves contact with staff and learning which is independent of staff*, even though the latter is still capable of being enhanced through the efforts of the staff as well as through the facilities for learning provided by the institution.

Higher Education should be, for the student, a process of intellectual (including creative) development which, as a process, requires the opportunity to explore conflicting hypotheses and come to independent conclusions, with time for reflection, amendment and consolidation.

If a study unit seeks to achieve no more than the memorisation of information obtained from lectures or textbooks then the learning outcomes which have been defined for it are inappropriate for Higher Education.

The function of a university teacher is to motivate students and stimulate their interest in a subject (where necessary), guide their learning and encourage their educational and professional development.

There is a balance to be struck between the extent to which this learning is directed by staff and the extent to which it is left to the initiative of the students themselves. Generally speaking it can be expected that the appropriate balance will shift from the former to the latter as the student progresses through his or her programme of studies.

A common mistake is to devise syllabuses which are overloaded.

Overladen syllabuses will lead to students trying to cope with their demands within a limited time by resorting to a superficial study of the subject.

It is therefore worth asking of any syllabus:
“Is all of this really necessary in order to attain the intended learning outcomes?”

The appropriate balance between theory and practice may need particular consideration.

It is necessary to assess whether students achieve the required learning outcomes before the relevant ECTS credits can be awarded.

The ENQA “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA” state that student assessment procedures are expected to:

- *be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives; [and]*
- be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification...

The ENQA “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA” also recommend that students should be

..... clearly informed about
the assessment strategy being used for their
programme,

what examinations or other assessment methods they
will be subject to,

what will be expected of them, and

the criteria that will be applied to the assessment
of their performance.