

# York St John University

## Writing & Using Programme Learning Outcomes

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## What are programme learning outcomes?

Programme Learning Outcomes are the central organising feature of student learning for a programme of study. They are written primarily for enrolled and prospective students to give them an idea of what is expected of them during the programme they are undertaking. However, it is important to recognise that they are used in a number of ways by different stakeholders too, including accrediting and regulating bodies and employers and industry groups. As such, they need to be written in **plain English** and in a way that avoids, where possible, the jargon of the discipline.

Simply put, programme learning outcomes are the skills and the ways of thinking and knowing which students should be able to demonstrate by the time the assessment processes for the programme have been completed. Unlike, objectives, which state what the **tutor** plans to achieve, outcomes state what it is that the **student** should achieve. Outcomes are thus more student-focussed.

## Features of Programme Learning Outcomes

Programme Learning Outcomes are statements of what students will be able **to do** as a result of successfully completing a programme of study. Well-designed learning outcomes:

- Relate to the programme aims
- Refer to relevant external reference points (Subject benchmarks, PSRBs etc.)
- Are clear to staff, students and external examiners.

In designing learning outcomes, programme leaders should ensure that they have taken account of:

1. the appropriate level of study according to the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#)
2. relevant [Subject Benchmark Statements](#)
3. relevant stakeholder standards and expectations including students, professional and industry associations, employers and [professional, statutory and regulatory bodies \(PSRBs\)](#), where applicable
4. the [York St John University Graduate Attributes](#)
5. the views and contributions of the programme teaching **team**; this should **not** be the responsibility of the individual staff member leading the curriculum design process.

## Expectations

PLOs should be developed for individual **levels** of a programme, to give students an understanding of how we expect them to develop during one academic year of their course, or equivalent for part-time students

Programme learning outcomes have particular characteristics. They:

- define the scope and depth of the programme level
- show progression in levels of skills, knowledge and ways of thinking
- **use language that is comprehensible to students**, prospective students, schools, employers, parents, PSRBs and other relevant stakeholders
- identify what 'typical' students will know and be able to do on graduation
- are measurable, realistic and achievable within the context and timeframe
- are realised through component modules over the extent of the programme level
- are demonstrated through course assessment.

YSJU requires that there should typically be a minimum of 4 and maximum of 8 PLOs per programme level. There may be exceptions to this for Level 7 or 8 programmes and those involving professional bodies (PSRBs).

Effective programme learning outcomes are written using the following structure:

<b>Stem</b>	a leading statement in the future tense, highlighting that the following actions are expected to be achieved by students by the end of the level of study
<b>Level and PLO number</b>	indicating the FHEQ level of study and itemised number
<b>Active verb</b>	indicating specifically what you want students to know, consider or do
<b>Focus / Object</b>	indicating the process, product or outcome of the action such as 'theories', 'research plan' and 'principles of ethical research'
<b>Context/Condition/Qualifier</b> (optional)	indicating any conditions that may apply such as '...using the appropriate referencing system', '...as identified in...', and '...relevant to...'

Some examples of effective and correctly formatted programme learning outcomes:

**On successful completion of this level of study, you will be able to:**

- 5.1: **Apply** the major theories and research procedures to contemporary social problems.
- 5.2: **Conduct** practical or practice-based tasks in a responsible, safe and ethical manner taking proper account of risk assessment and health and safety regulations.
- 5.3: **Use** established ideas, concepts and techniques, drawn from the study of business/organisations, to analyse a wide range of work-related problems and issues.

## Linking Learning Outcomes with Teaching & Assessment

Writing programme learning outcomes for courses should not be seen as an end in itself, they should be used as an integral part of curriculum design and teaching. This integration of outcomes with both assessment and teaching is known as 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999).

Constructive alignment means asking three main questions when thinking about designing courses:

1. What should the students know or be able to do by the end of the course (what are the intended learning outcomes)?
2. What methods will I use in my teaching to encourage students to work towards the achievement of these outcomes?
3. How will I design assessment in such a way that the tasks and criteria I use help both me and the students to know that they have achieved the intended outcomes?

If we use these three questions each time we undertake any form of curriculum development or design, then learning outcomes will move away from being a purely managerial tool to a more useful tool for both students and staff as a means of defining and driving student learning.

### Demonstrating levels within learning outcomes

In programme learning outcomes statements, verbs are a critical indicator of the nature of the required student engagement. In higher education, the expectation is that students will be pursuing increasingly more complex cognitive activity and function throughout their programme of study and as they progress through the levels.

The QAA recognises this progression across the range of levels through its Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) qualification descriptors. These need to be reflected in programme learning outcomes and assessment. The FHEQ descriptors for all levels can be found at [https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf?sfvrsn=170af781\\_16](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf?sfvrsn=170af781_16)

Bloom's Taxonomy provides a list of verbs with increasing levels of complexity in cognitive activity and function. These can be used to specify the nature of student learning activity.

<b>Level of cognitive ability</b>	<b>Which active verbs are useful?</b>	<b>Example outcomes – ‘By the end of this level of study, you will be able to...’</b>
<p><b>Knowledge - What do we expect students to know? This basic level focuses on recall and description</b></p>	<p>Know; Define; Memorise; List; Recall; Name; Relate; Identify; State; Describe; Show; Quote; Present, Record, Reproduce, Arrange, Outline, Recognise, Examine, Name, Duplicate, Tabulate.</p>	<p>List the operation principles of common digital circuit applications</p> <p>Identify key features of single celled organisms</p> <p>Identify and describe different forms of the sonnet</p>
<p><b>Comprehension - What do we expect students to be able to interpret?</b></p> <p><b>How do students convey their understanding as well as their recall?</b></p>	<p>Discuss, Review, Explain, Locate, Illustrate, Clarify, Select, Summarise, Conclude, Restate, Recognise, Classify, Translate, Express, Interpret, Contrast, Predict, Associate, Estimate, Extend.</p>	<p>Explain how the life cycle of a lytic virus operates</p> <p>Review a range of social science research methods</p>
<p><b>Application - Can students use a theory or information in different situations?</b></p> <p><b>Are students able to articulate the relevance of teaching in other circumstances?</b></p>	<p>Solve, Examine, Modify, Interpret, Apply, Use, Practise, Demonstrate, Classify, Schedule, Operate, Dramatise, Employ, Illustrate, Choose, Solve, Write, Calculate, Complete, Show, Relate, Classify, Experiment.</p>	<p>Use a Lineweaver-Burke plot to calculate Vmax and Km</p> <p>Apply appropriate statistical tests to a dataset</p> <p>Use P200 and P1000 Gilson pipettes independently and accurately</p>
<p><b>Analysis - Can students identify and explain relationships between material?</b></p> <p><b>Can they break knowledge down into constituent parts and show how these parts relate to each other?</b></p>	<p>Differentiate, Investigate, Appraise, Criticise, Debate, Compare, Contrast, Analyse, Distinguish, Categorise, Inspect, Test, Question, Solve, Separate, Order, Connect, Explain, Calculate, Relate.</p>	<p>Calculate how many white blood cells are in a litre of blood</p> <p>Compare the replication processes of RNA and DNA viruses</p> <p>Analyse recent news stories using the IPA’s seven common propaganda devices</p>
<p><b>Synthesis - Can students take the elements of what they have learnt and put them together in a different way? Can they develop a plan or a proposal from a set of knowledge?</b></p>	<p>Assemble, Organise, Compose, Propose, Construct, Design, Create, Manage, Develop, Specify, Modify, Plan, Collect, Formulate, Arrange, Devise, Modify, Derive, Develop, Integrate, Rearrange, Substitute, Invent, Generalise.</p>	<p>Construct a dichotomous classification key to identify plant specimens</p> <p>Design programmes using selection statements</p> <p>Manage the budget for a practical film production project</p>
<p><b>Evaluation - Can students make judgements about knowledge? Can they construct an argument or compare opposing views?</b></p>	<p>Judge, Select, Evaluate, Choose, Assess, Rate, Measure, Argue, Defend, Score, Compare, Estimate, Value, Discriminate, Support, Recommend, Conclude, Summarise, Appraise, Revise.</p>	<p>Evaluate the possible approaches to film-editing</p> <p>Assess to what extent educational theory is applicable to education policy</p>

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## Key Questions to ask yourself

When writing the programme learning outcomes you might find it useful to keep in mind the following key questions.

Has the programme teaching team been consulted and involved in the development of the PLOs?	<input type="checkbox"/>
What are the exit awards for your programme i.e. Certificate of Higher Education, Diploma of Higher Education? Do your PLOs align with the relevant FHEQ descriptors?	<input type="checkbox"/>
What are the most important aspects of the discipline that your graduates need to know and do as a result of completing this programme?	<input type="checkbox"/>
How does this compare with programme learning outcomes for similar programmes at other comparable universities?	<input type="checkbox"/>
What is your rationale for including the identified aspects of the discipline?	<input type="checkbox"/>
What is your rationale for excluding aspects of the discipline that are included in other similar awards or which are valued by stakeholders?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the programme learning outcomes indicative of the expectations of a graduate at the relevant level descriptor set out in the FHEQ?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do the programme learning outcomes incorporate the University's graduate attributes?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the outcomes achievable and assessable?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the outcomes written in a language that students will understand?	<input type="checkbox"/>
How do the statements reference stakeholder views, including accrediting bodies?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Which component modules provide the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the programme learning outcomes through assessment?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the statements broad enough to allow the achievement of the outcomes to be demonstrated through a variety of approaches and experiences?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the statements specific enough to determine whether minimum standards have been met?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do the statements take account of the interests of the range of stakeholders (students, parents, employers, PSRBs, etc.)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Are the programme learning outcomes expressed in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>stem</b> – in future tense: 'By the end of this level of study, you will be able to ...'</li> <li>• <b>active verb</b> – indicating the nature of the student activity—specifically what you want them to know, consider or do—typically expressed in verbs such as, 'synthesise', 'write', 'debate' and 'differentiate'</li> <li>• <b>focus</b> – indicating the process, product or outcome of the action such as 'theories', 'research plan' and 'principles of ethical research'</li> <li>• <b>condition</b> – (optional) indicating any conditions that may apply such as '...using the appropriate referencing system', '...as identified in', and, '...relevant to'.</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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## A re-worked example for a Politics programme at Level 4

### *Initial PLOs*

#### **Level 4 students will be able to demonstrate:**

1. An awareness of differing perspectives on the nature and scope of politics;
2. An understanding of key concepts in politics, and how they apply to political phenomena;
3. An ability to identify political institutions and processes in domestic and international contexts;
4. An appreciation of the key figures and their contributions to the development of political ideas;
5. An ability to identify and engage with relevant academic literature to inform understanding;
6. An ability to communicate information and ideas and to construct arguments;
7. An ability to work both independently and collaboratively with fellow students.

### *Re-worked PLOs*

On successful completion of this level of study you will be able to:

- 4.1. **Demonstrate** an awareness of differing perspectives on the nature and scope of politics
- 4.2. **Define** key concepts in politics and how they apply to political phenomena
- 4.3. **Identify** political institutions and processes in domestic and international contexts
- 4.4. **Describe** the key figures and their contributions to the development of political ideas
- 4.5. **Find** and **evaluate** relevant academic literature to inform understanding
- 4.6. **Construct** convincing arguments and communicate information and ideas clearly
- 4.7. **Work** both independently and collaboratively with fellow students.



## Module PLO mapping proforma

Module	Maps to these PLOs	Is assessed by (F) – formative (carries no grade) (S) – summative (carries a grade)	Maps to FHEQ level
1AB123 – Introduction to something	4.1, 4.3	Debate (F) Video artefact (F) Annotated bibliography (F) Blog article (40%) (S) Portfolio (60%) (S)	Level 4