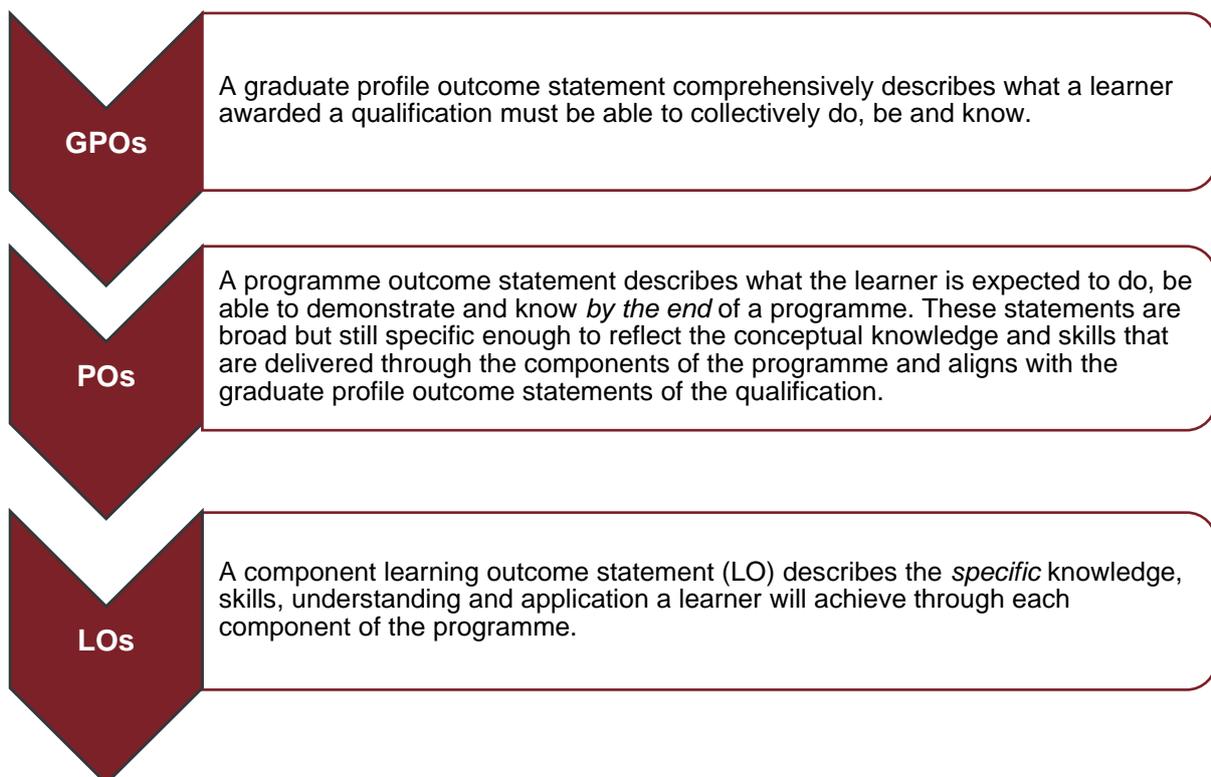


Writing learning outcomes: structure, considerations, and examples

This document provides guidance to tertiary education providers on the structure, key considerations and common mistakes to avoid when writing learning outcomes.

NZQF Programme Approval and Accreditation Rules 2021 and Training Scheme Rules 2021 establish the requirement for programmes of study and training schemes to have a set of learning outcomes to demonstrate a coherent way to achieve the qualification or intended outcomes and address the relevant needs of learners.

Learning outcomes can be at different hierarchies, depending on whether they apply to qualifications: i.e. Graduate Profile Outcomes (GPOs), programmes (programme outcomes), or component learning outcomes (LOs).



Structure

The standard format of a learning outcome includes an *action verb, content and context*:

- The action verb represents the performance a learner is expected to be able to demonstrate after engaging in a process of learning.
- The content is the knowledge and/or skills to be demonstrated in the performance.
- The context is the setting or conditions within which the performance is met.

Action verb	Content	Context
Evaluate	the implications of multiculturalism	in Aotearoa New Zealand's exercise industry

Key considerations

1. Learning outcome statements must be *SMART*:
 - a. **S**pecific: unambiguous and address defined areas of competencies - short statements that enable learners to understand the learning undertaken in the respective component. Including too many concepts in a single LO would lead to difficulty in linking the learning outcome to multiple assessments thereby lacking in clarity whether the learner has achieved the learning outcome or not. However, a narrow learning outcome would restrict adaptability knowledge and skills in application.
 - b. **M**easurable: linked to observable or demonstrable knowledge, skills, and attributes. The action verb at the beginning of the learning outcome is integral in illustrating the measurability and assess-ability.
 - c. **A**chievable: written for a learner to establish a clear minimum required performance expectation.
 - d. **R**elevant: aligned to the aim, content, instructional method and assessment methodology of the component.
 - e. **T**ime-bound: demonstrate achievement within a specific timeframe keeping in view the realistic constraints.
2. Manageable in terms of the number: there is no specific number of learning outcomes in a component. However, having too many learning outcomes would designate too much focus on curricular details and will be unmanageable in the process of assessment.
3. Demonstrate enduring understanding: through a detailed stakeholder consultation knowledge and skills that are *essential* should be included as learning outcomes.
4. Different from the title or purpose statements of Unit standards or GPOs of the qualification: unit standards are standards for assessment against learning outcomes, they themselves are not learning outcomes.

Examples

The following examples are selected to demonstrate the common areas of request for information (RFI) in the evaluation of the applications:

Inappropriate verbs

Action verbs describe knowledge and skills that learners are expected to demonstrate, and that are measurable through the assessments.

- *Learn about Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development.*

The action verb *learn* does not express a process of learning here.

- *Participate in supporting students with their learning, under supervision, in the education support and care context.*

Participate is an action verb. However, in the same vein, it only implies an action that does not explicitly result from the learning process. Not all action verbs are suitable for describing learning outcomes, as not all action verbs can indicate an outcome or result that are measurable, e.g. undertake, conduct, complete, implement.

Role of an action verb in determining the level of learning outcome

The action verb is crucial when determining the level of the LO, especially for higher level cognitive activities such as synthesise or evaluate, in addition to the specific knowledge and skills (content) and the settings (context) to which they apply/relate.

An action verb may be used at different levels, e.g. with the action verb 'demonstrate' or 'apply', the level will be demonstrated by the content and context as being more advanced or specialised knowledge and skills.

- *Choose and organise relevant financial information in deciding the appropriate financing strategy for a business.*

Choose and organise relevant financial information, were this to be included as a level 8 learning outcome, is below the level 8 descriptors. The learning outcome should be focused on financial strategy decision making rather than the approach. Therefore, the following revised learning outcome statement is better aligned to the level:

Devise appropriate financial strategies for a business through evaluating and applying relevant financial information.

Another example:

- *Calculate financial ratios to measure profitability, asset utilisation, working capital management, long-term financial stability, and financial markets.*

This learning outcome was proposed as a Level 5 outcome. A restructured statement that more accurately reflects the intention and the level of the learning outcome could be:

Apply financial analysis techniques to assess profitability, asset utilisation, working capital management, long-term financial stability, and financial markets for an organisation.

Unnecessary adverbs or modifiers

Some learning outcomes carry unnecessary adverbs or modifiers, which would make the learning outcomes difficult to measure.

- *Accurately measure health-related parameters in healthy adult individuals.*
- *Correctly perform and teach the major exercises and mobility techniques required for entry into the Strength and Conditioning profession.*
- *Successfully communicate with clients about their needs.*

Addition of adverbs to learning outcomes means that additional clarification or definition of these adverbs is required prior to assessment of the learning outcomes, e.g. in what sense it (the action) is systematic/accurate/correct/successful?

Multiple verbs

When writing learning outcomes with two or more action verbs, the semantic and logical relationships between the verbs is critical. Unless both actions are significant and work together, it is better to use only one verb. For instance,

- *Plan and prepare a financial analysis report for an organisation applying ethics, professionalism and industry norms.*

Rather than use *plan and prepare*, which carry the similar meaning, it might be better to replace them with *develop*.

- *Conceptualise, plan, organise, design and independently conduct research to solve complex identified problems.*

This example uses five verbs to lead the learning outcome statement, suggesting the following:

- Conceptualise research
- Plan research
- Organise research
- Design research
- Conduct research.

The four preceding actions are embedded in the last action *conduct*, which, like *undertake*, is not a verb describing outcomes but a task. This statement requires a rewrite based on the component aim and content, with reference to assessment methods and tasks.

Writing learning outcome as assessments task

Learning outcomes indicate what learners are able to do with the knowledge and skills gained through the learning journey of a component. The achievement of the learning outcomes is judged through successful completion of assessments. In some instances, assessment tasks are proposed as learning outcomes.

- *At the successful completion of this course, students will be able to complete a small research project.*

This is a task that does not indicate the knowledge, skills and application involved. As such, this is an inappropriate learning outcome statement in terms of format, action verb, content and context.

Another example:

The learners will be able to:

- *Implement a research proposal.*
- *Undertake a comprehensive literature review within a chosen field of practice.*
- *Gather, store and critically analyse data relevant to the research topic using appropriate and justifiable methods and tools.*

The first statement in this example does not express a learning outcome but a task. In addition, the statement is not in the standard learning outcome format, as suggested above.

Similarly, the verbs *undertake*, *gather* and *store* describe tasks instead of consequential learning outcomes. These three statements present a process of actions involved in a project rather than being an outcome of a learning.

Summary

1. **Start** by reflecting what learners are expected to learn in the component, bearing in mind the considerations for selection of learning outcomes, as stated above.
2. **Begin** with a stem statement: *On successful completion of the component, the learners will be able to.*
3. **Write** simple and concise statements using the structure specified above to demonstrate most precisely the intended outcome.

Further reading guide

Kennedy, D. 2006. *Writing and using learning outcomes: a practical guide*. Cork: University College Cork. Accessed at <https://cora.ucc.ie/bitstream/handle/10468/1613/A%20Learning%20Outcomes%20Book%20D%20Kennedy.pdf?sequence=1>

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Newcastle University. 2018. Guidance on writing learning outcomes. Accessed at <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/assets/documents/res-writinglearningoutcomes.pdf>

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Moon, J. 2000. Linking levels, learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Accessed at http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Learning_Outcomes_Edinburgh_2004/77/4/040701-02Linking_Levels_plus_ass_crit-Moon_577774.pdf

CEDEFOP. 2017. *Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes: a European handbook*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Accessed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/566770>