Brookes Briefing

Writing Intended Learning Outcomes

Across higher education, both in the UK and internationally, the use of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) has become a defining feature of curriculum design and quality assurance. This outcomes-based approach seeks to make explicit what learners are expected to know, understand, and be able to demonstrate as a result of their studies. It provides clarity and transparency for students, supports effective assessment design, and aligns with national frameworks such as the **Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ, 2024)** and the expectations of the Office for Students (OfS), particularly **Conditions of Registration** B1, B2, B4 and B5.

In essence, ILOs are 'statements of what a student is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning' (Kennedy, 2006, p.5). At Brookes, three levels of ILOs are typically used: programme-level outcomes, module-level outcomes, and session-level outcomes. Each serves to clarify expectations for students and to guide the teaching and assessment process. They also increase transparency for the learner in terms of what is expected of them, thus making the learning more supportive, inclusive and accessible, and aligns practice with the **Inclusive Learning and Teaching element of the Brookes IDEAS Model**. Crucially, however, the use of ILOs should reflect a commitment to 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999). Constructive alignment is where teaching activities and assessment tasks are explicitly and clearly aligned to the ILOs across all levels (programme, module and session) and accurately align with the **FHEQ (2024)** qualification descriptors, the **QAA Subject Benchmark Statements** and/or the subject's Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) requirements. When used well, ILOs make the learning process clearer, improve consistency across programmes, and help students understand how teaching, learning and assessment fits together as part of a cohesive whole.

ILOs should be aligned to subject bench marks to ensure students are working toward disciplinary competence. The **EHRC advice note** recommends that while institutions are not required to make reasonable adjustments to competence standards, they do need to make adjustments to the ways they are assessed.

ILOs differ from teaching 'aims' (which at Brookes form the basis of module descriptors published on Banner). Aims express the overall purpose or intention of a course (e.g. 'to develop students' knowledge of research methods'), whereas ILOs specify observable, measurable achievements ('to critically evaluate the methodology of a published research study'). The focus shifts from what the teacher intends to cover to what the learner can demonstrate. This subtle but significant shift supports inclusivity, transparency, and student agency in learning.

Principle 1: Clarity is all

Clarity is the cornerstone of effective ILOs. Each outcome should describe, in simple and accessible language, what learners will be able to demonstrate at the end of a learning activity. Well-written ILOs are 'SMART' (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound). They use active verbs that capture observable performance, avoiding vague or ambiguous language such as 'understand', 'know', or 'appreciate', which are difficult to demonstrate or measure.

A practical way to check clarity is to ask: '*Would I recognise this outcome if I saw it in student work?*' If not, the ILO needs refinement. Similarly, each ILO should typically express one main idea. Overly complex statements with multiple verbs or clauses can confuse both students and assessors.

Effective ILOs are generally:

- Written in the future tense ('By the end of the module, students will be able to…')
- Focused on what is essential to learn and demonstrate
- Appropriate to the level of study (e.g. undergraduate vs. postgraduate)
- Expressed in clear and concise language accessible to all learners
- Achievable within the available time and resources
- Assessable through observable performance or evidence

A consistent structure helps ensure clarity and comparability across modules and programmes. The **Brookes Module Descriptor Template** for this uses the prompt: 'on successful completion of this module, students will be able to:' to frame each ILO and ensure consistency:

Examples: 'On successful completion of this module, students will be able to…'

- Describe the main steps in a risk assessment.
- Create a concept for a design solution that meets a client's brief.
- Critically review the methodology of a published research study in their discipline.

The above prompt can be adjusted for writing programme or session ILOs.

When writing ILOs, brevity helps. Gosling and Moon (2001) suggest keeping each ILO to a single sentence with one active verb, avoiding unnecessary jargon. This ensures that both staff and students can interpret ILOs clearly and consistently.

Principle 2: Address all Relevant Domains of Learning

Bloom (1956) identified three domains of learning that together capture the range of human development: the **cognitive** (intellectual skills), **affective** (attitudes and values), and **psychomotor** (practical or physical skills) domains. Each domain contains hierarchical levels of complexity, allowing educators to design ILOs that reflect both foundational and advanced learning. Incorporating outcomes from more than one domain helps ensure a holistic learning experience.

When drafting ILOs, consider:

1. Which domain(s) are relevant to your learning opportunity
2. Which level within the domain matches the intended depth of learning
3. Which action verbs best express the intended achievement
4. How the outcome can be observed and assessed in practice

Indicative verbs for each domain include:

- **Cognitive domain (knowledge and intellectual skills):** define, explain, apply, analyse, evaluate, create
- **Affective domain (values and attitudes):** respond, justify, value, integrate, act, advocate
- **Psychomotor domain (practical skills):** perform, construct, adapt, manipulate, design, operate

For example, a Level 4 ILO might ask students to '*describe the main steps in a risk assessment*' (cognitive: knowledge). At Level 6, this could develop into '*critically evaluate the effectiveness of risk assessment procedures in different contexts*' (cognitive: evaluation). Postgraduate-level outcomes may move into synthesis or creation, such as '*design a comprehensive risk management strategy for a specified organisation*'.

The **affective domain**, as described by Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (1964), is often overlooked yet vital for developing professional and ethical graduates. Outcomes in this domain might include '*demonstrate sensitivity to cultural diversity in teamwork*' or '*value the importance of ethical reasoning in research practice*'. These support the development of personal attributes and values recognised in the **FHEQ (2024)** as transferable skills.

The **psychomotor domain** (Simpson, 1972) captures practical and technical abilities. Depending on the discipline, this may include skills such as constructing a prototype, calibrating laboratory equipment, or performing a clinical procedure. At higher levels, students demonstrate independence, adaptation, and innovation in applying these skills.

By combining cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions, you can write ILOs that reflect the full spectrum of learning — intellectual, emotional, and practical — that not characterises higher education, but taps into the principles of **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**, thereby rendering teaching and assessment more accessible and inclusive.

Principle 3: Align ILOs, Teaching and Assessment

Biggs' (1999) theory of **constructive alignment** underpins contemporary curriculum design. It emphasises that effective teaching requires coherence between three key elements:

1. What we want students to learn (*intended learning outcomes*)
2. How we teach them (*learning activities and resources*), and
3. How we assess their learning (*assessment tasks*).

Alignment ensures that the ILOs are meaningfully supported and evaluated through the learning process.

In an aligned curriculum:

- ILOs articulate what students should achieve.
- Teaching activities provide opportunities to practise and develop those capabilities.
- Assessment tasks gather evidence that students have achieved the ILOs.

For instance, if an ILO requires students to '*critically evaluate*', then the teaching methods must engage them in analysis and critique, not merely recall. Assessment should likewise provide opportunities for evaluative judgement, such as through case analysis, research critique, or project work. Misalignment occurs when students are taught or assessed on tasks unrelated to the stated outcomes, leading to confusion and disengagement.

Constructive alignment also promotes fairness and transparency. When students understand how learning activities and assessments relate to the ILOs, they are better equipped to take responsibility for their own learning. For academics, alignment simplifies programme design and ensures coherence across modules and levels.

ILOs: A Checklist

Use this checklist to review or refine your ILOs:

- Do they describe outcomes rather than teaching processes?
- Does each ILO begin with a single, active, and assessable verb?
- Have vague verbs ("understand", "know", "be familiar with") been avoided?
- Are the ILOs observable and measurable in practice?
- Are they achievable within available time and resources?
- Do they address the relevant cognitive, affective, and/or psychomotor domains?
- Do they align with the overall aims of the session, module, and programme?
- Is the level of complexity appropriate to the qualification level?

Regularly reviewing ILOs helps ensure that they remain relevant, achievable, and aligned with both Brookes frameworks, the **FHEQ (2024)**, the evolving needs of students and advances in the use and integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (note that **QAA Subject Benchmark Statements** published from 2025 will incorporate artificial intelligence as a cross-cutting theme). Periodic discussion within programme teams can support consistency and good practice across modules and disciplines.

References, resources and further reading

Cite this article: Wilson-Medhurst, Sarah, and Wallbank, Adrian J. (2025) 'Writing Intended Learning Outcomes'. Oxford Centre for Academic Enhancement and Development: Oxford Brookes.

Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W., & Krathwohl, D. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I. Cognitive Domain.* New York: David McKay.

CAST (2024). *UDL Guidelines 3.0*. Available at: **https://udlguidelines.cast.org/**

Gosling, D., & Moon, J. (2001). *How to Use Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria*. London: SEEC Office.

Kennedy, D. (2006). *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A Practical Guide*. University College Cork.

Krathwohl, D. R., Bloom, B. S., & Masia, B. B. (1964). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook II. The Affective Domain*. New York: David McKay.

QAA (2025). *Subject Benchmark Statements*. Available at: **https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements#**

Simpson, E. J. (1972). *The Classification of Educational Objectives in the Psychomotor Domain*. Washington, DC: Gryphon House.

The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies (FHEQ, 2024). Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Further reading, links and resources:

Equality Challenge Unit (2015) **Understanding the Interaction of Competence Standards and Reasonable Adjustments.**

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2024) **Advice Note for the Higher Education Sector from the Legal Case of University of Bristol vs Abrahart.**

The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies' 2nd Edition updated in February 2024. See: **https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/the-frameworks-for-higher-education-qualifications-of-uk-degree-awarding-bodies-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=3562b281_11**

Sector recognised standards:

https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/53821cbf-5779-4380-bf2a-aa8f5c53ecd4/sector-recognised-standards.pdf

For a revision of Bloom's taxonomy:

Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001) *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Complete Edition*. New York: Longman.