

QUATREC 2 – Comparing qualifications for reliable recognition 2

Country chapter

Country: United Kingdom

Chapter 1. General information about the use of learning outcomes

1.1 Legal framework for learning outcomes in higher education

There is no legal framework for learning outcomes in higher education in the United Kingdom. Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom are autonomous. As degree awarding bodies, higher education institutions are responsible for the standards and provision of qualifications, including the design of learning outcomes.

1.2 Categories/ dimensions in which learning outcomes are expressed (e.g., knowledge, skills, competences) and how are they defined?

At a national level, there is no legal requirement concerning the categories or dimensions in which learning outcomes are expressed since the higher education institutions in the United Kingdom retain the autonomy to govern their own programme design.

However, learning outcomes are used in programme specifications and are also reflected in the assessment outcomes. As evidenced from the selection of higher education programmes examined during this study, learning outcomes are expressed in a positive manner in terms of the knowledge, skills, and competences that a qualification holder can demonstrate. Examples are included in section 1.6 of this report.

1.3 Are learning outcomes subject to Quality Assurance? Who assesses and how?

Each higher education institution in the United Kingdom is autonomous and responsible for maintaining its standards of provision. This includes monitoring and reviewing its own programmes to ensure that standards are being maintained, which includes the maintenance of learning outcomes. Programmes are usually self-evaluated by the higher education institution's departments, but includes feedback from staff, students, external examiners, and professional bodies. Programmes are regularly reviewed by external auditors, who check that a programme achieves its set learning outcomes.

Since education is a devolved competence in the United Kingdom, the way quality assurance is conducted differs between England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland:

- In England, higher education institutions are audited by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on behalf of the Office for Students (OfS). The OfS became responsible for regulating higher education in England following the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017. The QAA assesses the quality and standards of higher education institutions and advises the OfS of its findings. These audits review the quality of institutions and programmes, and as part of this, learning outcomes are reviewed.
- In Wales, higher education institutions are audited by the QAA on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The QAA review higher education institutions as part of the Quality Enhancement Review Process, which includes reviews of programmes, and therefore of learning outcomes.
- In Northern Ireland, the QAA works with the Department for Economy to ensure the quality and standards of higher education institutions. They do this through the Annual Provider Review.
- In Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is responsible to ensuring there is a process for assessing and improving higher education institutions, and it contracts QAA Scotland to do this on its behalf. Each institution conducts an Enhancement Led Institutional Review to manage the quality and standards of learning and teaching, and this, together with the subject reviews that are run by higher education institutions and guided by the SFC, include a review of learning outcomes.

Furthermore, in England, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)¹ is an assessment conducted by the Office for Students that the Department for Education introduced in 2016. The remit of the TEF assessment is to examine the graduate-level employment and further study outcomes (as well as excellence in teaching) at higher education institutions. This is conducted on an institution-by-institution basis and each institution is awarded a grade (gold, silver, bronze or provisional) based on their undergraduate provision. In accordance with the DfE's

¹ Office for Students, (n.d.). *About the TEF*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/about-the-tef/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20TEF%3F%20The%20Teaching%20Excellence%20and,in%20terms%20of%20graduate-level%20employment%20or%20further%20study>. [accessed August 2021].

specification², the assessment framework in use facilitates the identification of student learning outcomes. It looks at the ‘acquisition of attributes such as lifelong learning skills and others that allow a graduate to make a strong contribution to society, economy and the environment...progression to further study, acquisition of knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to compete for a graduate level job that requires the high level of skills arising from higher education’³. To identify these outcomes, examiners would need to look at the learning outcomes for programmes.

Across the United Kingdom, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) accredit higher education programmes that form part of the requirement to register in the regulated professions or protected titles. As part of the initial and continuing accreditation of the programmes, the learning outcomes are assessed to ensure they met the standards required for pre-registration or registration as appropriate. The PSRBs accredit those programmes that have learning outcomes that meet their standards.

1.4 Are learning outcomes of the study programme indicated in Diploma Supplement (if there is one)?

In the United Kingdom, the DS is not mandatory and issued by a very few HEIs. Not all HEIs in the United Kingdom, which issue the Diploma Supplement, indicate learning outcomes in them. Some HEIs in the United Kingdom prefer to issue Higher Education Achievement Report instead.

Chapter 2. Good practice for writing learning outcomes in terms of recognition

1.5 Recommendations, guidelines, set procedures for writing learning outcomes

In the United Kingdom, the QAA is responsible for auditing and reviewing the quality of higher education institutions and higher education programmes. As part of this, the QAA publishes reference documents that the United Kingdom’s recognised higher education institutions can use as guidance. A number of these documents include guidance on how learning outcomes should be

² Department for Education, (2017). *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework Specification*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658490/Teaching_Excellence_and_Student_Outcomes_Framework_Specification.pdf [accessed August 2021].

³ Department for Education, (2017). *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework Specification*. p. 24.

expressed and implemented. As higher education institutions in the United Kingdom are autonomous, it should be noted that these guidance documents are not legally binding.

These documents include:

- UK Quality Code for Higher Education – Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards⁴
- Characteristics Statement – Qualifications involving more than one degree-awarding body⁵
- Subject Benchmark Statements⁶
- Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements⁷
- Making Use of Credit: A Companion to the Higher Education Credit Framework for England⁸

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (also known as the Quality Code) is a key reference point for all higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. It provides institutions with fundamental principles regarding the quality of experience they should offer to students, integrity of the awards and the quality of provision. It also provides guidance on the learning outcomes that students should expect to achieve. The Quality Code covers all four nations of the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and all providers of British higher education operating internationally. The QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards defines learning outcomes as a: 'Statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a designated programme of study (which leads to a qualification)'⁹.

⁴ QAA, (2014). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf?sfvrsn=170af781_14 [accessed June 2021].

⁵ QAA, (2020). *Characteristics Statement – Qualifications involving more than one degree-awarding body*. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-involving-more-than-one-degree-awarding-body.pdf?sfvrsn=4cc5ca81_10 [accessed June 2021].

⁶ QAA, (n.d.). *Subject Benchmark Statements*. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements#> [accessed June 2021].

⁷ QAA, (2021). *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements*. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england#:~:text=The%20Higher%20Education%20Credit%20Framework%20for%20England%3A%20Advice,credit%2C%20and%20contains%20the%202021%20Credit%20Framework%20Table>. [accessed July 2021].

⁸ QAA, (2021). *Making Use of Credit: A Companion to the Higher Education Credit Framework for England*. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england#:~:text=The%20Higher%20Education%20Credit%20Framework%20for%20England%3A%20Advice,credit%2C%20and%20contains%20the%202021%20Credit%20Framework%20Table>. [accessed July 2021].

⁹ QAA, (2014). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*. p. 5.

The Quality Code describes one of the fundamental aspects of the UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, which is that qualifications are awarded based on demonstrated achievement of outcomes rather than the duration of study. Qualification descriptors are used to set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected to be achieved from each degree type. The descriptors that are part of the UK Framework for Higher Education qualifications describe the level of knowledge and the type of abilities that the holders are expected to have upon completion.

The Quality Code describes how degree-awarding institutions in the United Kingdom are responsible for setting and maintaining the quality standard of the programmes that they provide, ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the corresponding qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications. Academic programmes are typically structured to develop students general- and profession-specific skills. The required general skills are based on the requirements set by employers when hiring individuals while the professional-specific skills are based on the specific subjects.

When setting learning outcomes, the Quality Code states that degree-awarding bodies in the United Kingdom ensure that each programme provides students with the learning and assessing opportunities to achieve and demonstrate the learning outcomes. Degree-awarding bodies also use different methods of assessment to help students to demonstrate their learning achievements and to ensure that qualifications are awarded only when the learning outcomes are met.

According to the QAA'S UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, when designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing programmes of study, degree awarding bodies take the following into consideration:

- the alignment between the intended learning outcomes of the programme and the expectations set out in the qualification descriptors of the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications
- whether there is a sufficient volume of assessed study that will demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved
- whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that all students following the programme can achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes¹⁰

¹⁰ QAA, (2014). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*. p. 36.

The Quality Code notes that when creating the learning outcomes, degree-awarding bodies may need to consider other reference points such as requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, industry or employer expectations.

As defined in the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, the QAA reviews consider how:

- degree-awarding bodies' approval and review processes ensure that the structure of the programme (the volume, nature, and assessment of learning) is adequate to achieve the outcomes indicated by the qualification descriptors and to meet the other requirements of the frameworks
- the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are used by degree-awarding bodies to assure themselves that the achievement of students is of an academic standard which meets or exceeds the threshold standards set out in the relevant framework¹¹

Subject Benchmark Statements are published by the QAA and are intended to be used as guidance documents. In addition to describing the nature of study, they describe the academic standards expected. In effect, these are learning outcomes, as they describe what graduates of that subject area would be expected to know, do and understand upon graduation. It should, however, be noted that the Subject Benchmark Statements are not a national curriculum, and they do not prescribe particular programmes. They are broad in nature, in the sense that higher education institutions offer far more combinations of subjects than the Subject Benchmark Statements available. Nevertheless, the Subject Benchmark Statements are used as '...reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes'¹².

The Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements¹³ provides guidance on how learners can accumulate credit through the achievement of learning outcomes. It describes how credit is used to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been achieved¹⁴ but also discusses how learning outcomes can be used when considering credit transfer, particularly where the learning outcomes are comparable. Furthermore, the document describes

¹¹ QAA, (2014). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*. p. 13.

¹² QAA, (n.d.). *Subject Benchmark Statements*.

¹³ QAA, (2021). *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements*. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england> [accessed June 2022].

¹⁴ QAA, (2014). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*. p. 13.

how credit level descriptors can inform the development of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, which indicates a cohesion between all three elements¹⁵.

The Making Use of Credit: A Companion to the Higher Education Credit Framework for England¹⁶ document provides guidance on how credit can be used at higher education level when considering flexible learning routes, such as micro credentials, short courses, placements, accelerated degrees and other modes of learning. Within the document, there is guidance throughout on how learning achieved via the flexible learning routes should fit within the course’s learning outcomes.

Several higher education institutions publish guiding principles on how learning outcomes should be written. Examples of this are in section 1.6 of this report.

1.6 Formulation of learning outcomes (who defines, what methodology is used, who approves, ownership)

In the United Kingdom learning outcomes are set on an institution-by-institution and programme-by-programme basis. They are owned by the higher education institution offering the programme. If a programme is offered by a Listed Body but awarded by a recognised higher education institution, the higher education institution retains ownership of the programme (including the learning outcomes).

When a programme is linked to a subject where the QAA publishes subject benchmark statements, these can be reflected in the learning outcomes. When a programme is accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body, that body may be involved in the design of the programme or the approval of the programme (including the learning outcomes).

1.7 Good practice example of formulating learning outcomes

This section includes summaries and extracts from good practice examples from guidance provided online by recognised higher education institutions in the United Kingdom.

Example: University of Bristol

The University of Bristol’s Academic Quality and Policy Office website provides guidance on intended learning outcomes, stating that they will define ‘...what a learner will have acquired and will

¹⁵ QAA, (2014). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*. p. 13.

¹⁶ QAA, (2021). *Making Use of Credit: A Companion to the Higher Education Credit Framework for England*.

be able to do upon successfully completing their studies. ILOs [intended learning outcomes] should be expressed from the students' perspective and are measurable, achievable and assessable¹⁷.

Guidance is provided on the purpose of learning outcomes, what students and lecturers should know about them, how they should be written and who they should be written for. The guidance also covers the number of learning outcomes that should be written, how learning outcomes should be assessed, and how learning outcomes should be linked at unit, programme and award level¹⁸.

In accordance with the University's education regulations, policy and guidance, unit and programme directors are responsible for aligning the unit and programme learning outcomes. The guidance gives alternatives for using verbs such as 'know', 'understand', 'appreciate' etc and instead builds more on verbs contained within Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Objectives, focusing on those within the cognitive domain. Guidance is provided on the headings that should be used for learning outcomes, which are knowledge and understanding; cognitive skills; key skills; and practical and professional skills.

Example: University of Birmingham

The University of Birmingham's website contains guidance on writing programme specifications¹⁹. As part of this guidance, there is information on how to write learning outcomes within their programme specification documentation.

The documentation divides the learning outcomes into "Students are expected to have knowledge and understanding of" and "Students are expected to have attained the following skills and other attributes". Linked to this is the teaching and learning methods that facilitate achieving the learning outcomes. This is followed by a section on the summative assessment that must be achieved to pass the programme, and finally a section on the level of qualification or exit award, indicating the level of the learning outcome.

¹⁷ University of Bristol, (n.d.). *Intended learning outcomes*. Available at: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/approve/approvalguidance/intendedlearningoutcomes/> [accessed July 2021].

¹⁸ University of Bristol, (n.d.). *Information on Intended learning outcomes*. Available at: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/approve/approvalguidance/intendedlearningoutcomes/> [accessed July 2021].

¹⁹ University of Birmingham, *Programme Specifications Guidance*. Available at: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/registry/policy/programmeframework/guidance/Programme-specifications.aspx> [accessed June 2021].

Example: University of Reading

The University of Reading publishes guidance on inclusive learning outcomes and inclusive assessment, emphasising the need to ensure that assessments are aligned to the learning outcomes and test the achievement of those learning outcomes. It recommends that for assessment to be inclusive, learning outcomes must be inclusive too. The guidance states that for a learning outcome to be inclusive, it should ‘...create an output that is measurable, so that students can be tested on the extent to which they are meeting the outcome. For example: “evaluate”; or “compare and contrast”; or “critically assess” have measurable outputs²⁰. It goes on to state that learning outcomes can be met in a variety of different ways, through different methods of assessment, and therefore this is less likely to disadvantage any specific group of groups.

Example: Cardiff University

Cardiff University publishes online guidance on writing and using learning outcomes²¹. Their guidance covers learning outcomes for schemes of study and for modules.

In the guidance for schemes of study, it is stated that in accordance with university policy, the learning outcomes should be those that could be achieved by a ‘typical’ student, i.e. students achieving 2:1-2:2 degree classifications. The learning outcomes should reference the QAA’s Subject Benchmark Statements.

The guidance for the module learning outcomes reflect the guidance for the study programmes, in that they should be designed to reflect the learning achieved by a ‘modal’ student. The guidance refers to the notion of learning outcomes demonstrating general progression within schemes of study, and that the module learning outcomes should reflect the study programme learning outcomes. The guidance also confirms that the learning outcomes must reflect learning and assessment strategies, scheme aims, curriculum content and the assessment criteria.

The guidance also provides suggested vocabulary to be used in writing learning outcomes, particularly for activities giving evidence of knowing; comprehension; knowledge and understanding; analysis; synthesis; and evaluation.

²⁰ University of Reading, (n.d.). *Inclusive Assessment*. Available at: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/engaging-everyone/inclusive-assessment/ee-inclusive-learning-outcomes.aspx> [accessed July 2021].

²¹ Cardiff University, (n.d.). *Writing and using Learning Outcomes*. Available at: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/learning-hub/view/writing-and-using-learning-outcomes> [accessed July 2021].

Example: University of Worcester

The University of Worcester publishes a document entitled “Principles for course design: Guide to writing learning outcomes and developing assessment criteria”²². This document is intended for use in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by the university and can be used for the programme, or for specific modules or units. The document details what learning outcomes are and why they are used, particularly regarding assessment. It also explains how learning outcomes should be referenced to the FHEQ²³, the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark (if relevant) – now the Characteristics Statement: Foundation Degree²⁴, and also to Subject Benchmark Statements²⁵ and to professional or statutory body requirements where applicable.

1.8 Is the labour market involved in the development and use of the learning outcomes? If yes, then how?

No information provided.

²² University of Worcester, (2017). *Principles for course design: Guide to writing learning outcomes and developing assessment criteria*. Available at: <https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/LearningOutcomesGuide-PrinciplesforCourseDesign.pdf> [accessed June 2021].

²³ QAA, *The Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* (2014). Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks> [accessed June 2021].

²⁴ QAA, *Characteristics Statement: Foundation Degree*. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/foundation-degree-characteristics-statement-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=6fc5ca81_10 [accessed June 2021].

²⁵ QAA, *Subject Benchmark Statements*