A Guide to the Unit Details (UCMS)

Southern Cross University

DesigningaUnit

This guide supports staff to complete unit details in the Unit Course Management System (UCMS)

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Details

Level of Learning

Level of learning is a classification for units within a course. Designating the level of learning for a unit is based on the professional judgment of unit assessors and/or course coordinator and requires a whole of course approach. Depending on volume and/or duration, a course may have one to three levels of learning:

Level 1 is Introductory
Level 2 is Intermediate
Level 3 is Advanced

The decision should be made early in the unit design process and documented in the unit blueprint. The critical issue is that course structure, content, assessment and specific and generic learning outcomes are well aligned, justified and evidence-based.

Table 1.   Questions to consider when designating a level of learning for a unit.

Question	Information and examples
Are there any pre-requisites for the unit?	This may suggest that prior learning is required. If so the unit should be classified as Intermediate or Advanced.
Does the unit fit within a group of related units?	'Introduction to …..' 'Foundations of …..' 'Advanced …..'
Where does the unit fit in the progression of the course?	In a Bachelor degree, the level of learning may relate to the year of study, but this is not a necessary condition. For example, a level 2 (Intermediate) unit may be undertaken in the second session of year one however the same level 2 unit may also be taken in year 2, 3 or 4 or perhaps later in part time study. Rather than being a year of learning/enrolment equivalent, the level of learning reflects an increasing sophistication of the unit learning outcomes so that scaffolding of learning is explicit within a course.

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Question	Information and examples
What level do the majority of the unit learning outcomes align with?	The interactive overview in [Bloom's Revised Taxonomy](#) provides examples of levels of performance specified in learning outcomes: • A unit requiring students to complete mostly lower order tasks to achieve learning outcomes will most likely be classified as 'Introductory'. • An 'Intermediate' unit would require students to complete a mixture of lower and higher order tasks. • An 'Advanced' unit would require students to complete mostly higher order tasks.

AQF and level of learning

When units are used across AQF levels the following principles are proposed:

• Units designed originally for one AQF level should be labelled with that AQF level even if used in another course with a different AQF level;

• Units designed originally for one AQF level with a nominated level of learning should keep this nominated level of learning even if used in another course with a different AQF level;

• Units designed originally for one AQF level with a nominated level of learning should keep this nominated level of learning, unless the course is abolished or the unit removed from the award and incorporated in another course with a different AQF level.

Content
Description

The description provides a general overview of the content studied in the unit combined with an overview of the teaching approach employed within the unit. The example below shows both content and learning approaches within the 50 word limit prescribed for this section of the template.

> Introduces students to digital video production methodology including storyboarding, client management, production scheduling and staffing. Students will engage in a project-based learning approach with practical activities in a production studio using industry standard software.

Other examples of teaching approaches include:

• problem-based learning (an exploratory/inquiry based strategy – content is engaged through case studies, scenarios or problems)

• teacher directed activities and experiences (a direct strategy – structured learning experiences built around subject-based content)

• cooperative learning (an interactive or experiential strategy – discussion, sharing or content creation among students working towards a common goal)

• community engaged learning (an experiential strategy – students engage with the community to achieve student learning and community goals)

• workplace based learning (an experiential strategy – students engage with focused resources to prepare and support them through internships or work practice).

Content

This section should be more detailed than the unit Description section, listing the modules/topics/ scenarios (or similar) to be covered in the unit. Content should be aligned with the unit learning outcomes and assessment tasks. A whole of course approach should ensure connectivity with other units and enable overlap of content where necessary.
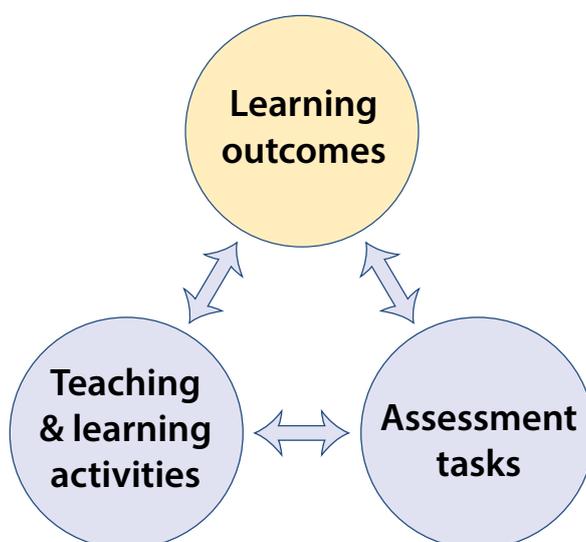
Learning Outcomes

Unit learning outcomes help direct and organise a unit. They make it clear to students what they should focus on when working through the unit and what they will be expected to demonstrate when being assessed. Learning outcomes thus direct the nature of the learning activities and the associated assessments. When

writing (or reworking) unit learning outcomes it is important to align learning outcomes with teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks and criteria. This principle is called constructive alignment and is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Learning outcomes should not be a description or summary of the content, but rather a set of statements which capture what it is we want students to know, do and value by the end of the unit. There should be no 'hidden content', that is, content, skills and learning activities that do not relate clearly to one or more of the learning outcomes for the unit.

Keeping learning outcomes to a minimum helps students focus on the essential learning components of a unit and helps the unit assessor to refine assessment to necessary achievements. The guidelines allow no more than seven learning outcomes.

Figure 1.   Constructive alignment between learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks. Adapted from Biggs 1999, p. 27.

Writing learning outcomes

In writing unit learning outcomes avoid words like 'be familiar with…' and 'understand'. Understanding by itself is a process that is internal to the individual. The assessment of understanding requires that a student should be able to do something that demonstrates understanding, for example, being able to 'explain the connection between…', or being able to 'present a report which takes account of…'. Be as specific as possible.

Include some higher order objectives. Cover both generic academic skills and course specific skills, even in foundational units.

This resource on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy shows verbs related to learning arranged along a hierarchy from simple cognitive tasks to more complex cognitive tasks. The more complex tasks like synthesis and analysis are commonly referred to as 'higher order' tasks. The choices we make about verbs are very important and will be influenced by our students' needs, the content, the place of the unit in a course, and the overall aims of the course. The desired level of performance specified in a unit learning outcome should be evident in the unit assessment tasks and associated rubrics.
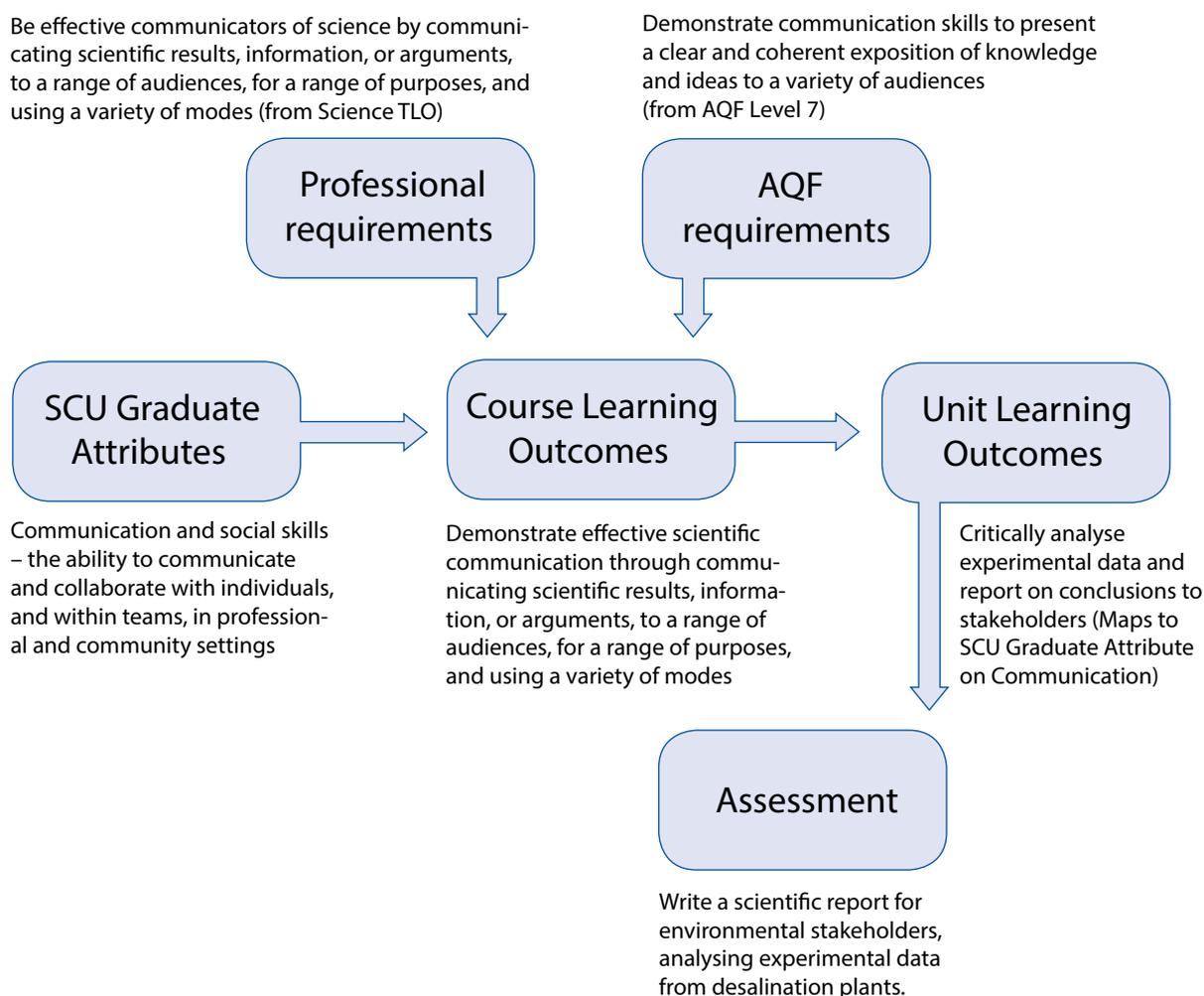
The interactive overview in Bloom's Revised Taxonomy provides examples of levels of performance specified in learning outcomes.

Unit Learning Outcomes in the broader context of the course

Unit learning outcomes also need to be thought of in relation to: the broader context of the course – SCU Graduate Attributes and course learning outcomes; relevant AQF levels; discipline based threshold learning outcomes (if available); and any professional accreditation requirements that may apply.

The relationship between course and unit learning outcomes, graduate attributes and assessment is intertwined as demonstrated in Figure 2 in an example taken from the sciences.

Figure 2. Relationship between a SCU Graduate Attribute, Course Learning Outcome and Unit Learning Outcome (AQF 7). Adapted from Graduate Attributes at SCU Discussion Paper – April 2012.

Be effective communicators of science by communicating scientific results, information, or arguments, to a range of audiences, for a range of purposes, and using a variety of modes (from Science TLO)

Demonstrate communication skills to present a clear and coherent exposition of knowledge and ideas to a variety of audiences (from AQF Level 7)

Professional requirements

AQF requirements

SCU Graduate Attributes

Course Learning Outcomes

Unit Learning Outcomes

Communication and social skills – the ability to communicate and collaborate with individuals, and within teams, in professional and community settings

Demonstrate effective scientific communication through communicating scientific results, information, or arguments, to a range of audiences, for a range of purposes, and using a variety of modes

Critically analyse experimental data and report on conclusions to stakeholders (Maps to SCU Graduate Attribute on Communication)

Assessment

Write a scientific report for environmental stakeholders, analysing experimental data from desalination plants.

Further information

Teaching Teaching & Understanding Understanding is a short film on the Teaching and Learning website about teaching at university and tertiary level educational institutions. It is based on Biggs' constructive alignment theory.

Graduate Attributes

The graduate attributes in a unit are a selection taken from the SCU graduate attributes. The relevant graduate attributes should be clear in the unit learning outcomes, embedded across the learning activities and measured in the assessment tasks. Decisions about what graduate attributes are to be included will usually be part of a whole of course discussion. All of SCU's graduate attributes should be addressed across an entire course.

Normally a single unit would possess no more than seven learning outcomes and embed no more than three SCU graduate attributes into the learning outcomes and associated assessment. Exceptions will occur in capstone units designed to aggregate all graduate attributes across a course.

Table 2 below shows individual learning outcomes from a range of units demonstrating the connection between SCU graduate attributes and unit learning outcomes. Click on the Sticky Note feature under each Learning Outcome for an explanation of each outcome statement.

Table 2.   Unit learning outcomes and graduate attributes.

Learning Outcome	Graduate Attributes
employ critical judgment and critical thinking in creating new understanding.	GA1, GA2
examine the principles, methods, standards, values and boundaries of marketing and demonstrate a capacity to question these.	GA1, GA3, GA4
effectively communicate (written and oral) with medical specialists and non-specialists and in cross-cultural contexts.	GA6, GA7
develop an independent learning approach taking responsibility for your own learning, committing to continuous reflection, self-evaluation and self-improvement.	GA5
develop creative and effective responses to Human Resource problems in a broad range of contexts.	GA2, GA4
formulate a teaching perspective that acknowledges local, national and international cultural issues, concerns and conflicts.	GA3, GA7
explain economic, legal, social and cultural issues in the use of information.	GA4, GA7

Further information

Support for embedding the relationship between assessment, learning outcomes and graduate attributes is available in the Purposes and Principles of Assessment module, as part of the Teaching Practice Online suite of modules available to academic staff. Within this module are sections on:

- Alignment of assessment with learning objectives
- Graduate Attributes
- Assessing Graduate Attributes.

Assessment

Decisions about assessment type and volume should be made in consultation with the course coordinator to ensure a whole-of-course approach. It will be important to ensure that the volume of assessment is not excessive from both the students' and the teaching staff perspectives. This will include consideration of the number and timing of the assessment tasks, the word or time limits, and the weighting of relevant tasks. The following resources will assist decisions made regarding assessment schemes:

- At-a-Glance on Designing an Assessment Scheme
- At-a-Glance on Purposes and Principles of Assessment

Further information

Further support is available in the Teaching Practice Online suite of modules available to academic staff. The module Purposes and Principles of Assessment covers aligning assessment, learning outcomes and graduate attributes. The module Designing an Assessment Scheme covers decisions of what to assess, what methods to employ, and the technologies to use. Look for the following sections on:

- Alignment of assessment with learning objectives
- Graduate Attributes

- Assessing Graduate Attributes
- Selecting assessment methods
- Determining load, weighting and timing.

Teaching and Learning Arrangements

Each discrete unit offering has a teaching and learning arrangement:

- the duration of each session
- the frequency with which it is delivered
- depending on the mode of offering, one or more methods of presentation and delivery may be included.

There will often be accepted ways within a school around the teaching and learning arrangements. Decisions about these arrangements will consider the nature of the learning outcomes and student and staff workload. Teaching and learning arrangements should be a whole of course decision initially. Details of these arrangements will assist the University to plan timetables for on-campus teaching.

The following examples of teaching and learning arrangements demonstrate a combination of more than one method of presentation and delivery:

- blended learning unit offerings may combine face-to-face lectures, online tutorials and structured online learning
- an external (online only) unit offering may combine online lectures, online tutorials and a self-directed project.

Further information

The At-a-Glance resource on Blended Learning covers teaching approaches that provide equitable learning experiences regardless of location or mode of study.

Notional Student Workload

A notional workload provides:

- students with guidance of the expected time commitment
- Unit Assessors with a measure against which they can judge volume of work within a unit
- a transparent means to measure course volume of learning for each AQF level.

The workload of students in a standard unit over a session is distributed over 12 teaching weeks and 3 learning/assessment weeks. Variations in length of study may occur for clinical, practical, community or work integrated learning or for units with intensive modes.

Normally a single 12 credit point unit would accrue a notional student workload of between 130 to 150 hours per session. There is no difference in the notional hours for undergraduate and postgraduate units. Notional hours are consistent across units at AQF levels 5 to 10.

If subjects exceed the SCU standard workload by more than 20 hours the workload should be discussed with the course coordinator. Normally even in community or workplace learning the course workload would not exceed 600 hours per session. If the unit requires significantly more time, then consideration should be given to making it double-weighted. Decisions about workload that are beyond the norm should be discussed with the course coordinator and course team as this would be a whole of course consideration.

Determining notional workload

The actual amount of time each student dedicates to their learning in a unit will depend on many factors: prior knowledge, motivation, study habits, work commitments etc. However, notional workload is not a measure of the actual time spent by an individual. It is an estimation of the expected time students would spend throughout the 15 weeks of a session as a best case scenario. Such estimates are based on professional judgment of the unit assessor and reviewing colleague or course coordinator and formal and informal student feedback on the unit. Estimations of student workload are developed during the unit design process and considered in the unit blueprint.

Scheduled study may include a variety of activities usually associated with contact hours (lectures, tutorial, laboratories). In the online or blended learning environment this may also include virtual lectures or tutorials via Bb Collaborate, viewing of recorded lectures or designated online activities e.g. contributions to discussion forums, creation of a blog etc. Scheduled activities may include times when teaching staff are not involved e.g. team meetings in team based learning.

Personal study will include the range of activities not included in scheduled study and can include reading (books, papers, online resources, student contributions), preparing for assessment, review of learning activities, discussion with peers.

Learning Resources

This section details the prescribed texts for the course. The term 'Recommended References' used previously is now not included in this section. It will be called 'Optional References' instead, available in the unit information guide.

When planning text book and essential resources it is important to consider these in association with other resources the students may have to use e.g. readings, recommended web site and other recommended resources. The workload associated with prescribed readings in all of its forms will impact section Notional student workload.

Liaison Librarians provide advice and assistance in planning and creating a list of electronic and print titles for your unit. The library has a range of subject guides that assist students to focus on the discipline. Your Liaison Librarian can assist you with myReadings, eBooks, linking to eResources, referencing guides and copyright.

If you have any questions about any of the issues discussed in this guide, please contact the Teaching and Learning representative for your School.