

# Course Learning Objectives at Victoria University

*“The purpose of learning objectives is to clarify the scope, extent, and effects of teaching and learning so they must be ‘precise, challenging and complete’”*  
(Laurillard, 2002, p. 183).

Course learning objectives are clear statements of the expectations that academics have for student outcomes in their courses. Learning objective statements do not exhaustively describe all aspects of the intended learning but rather provide an overview identifying the key priorities of the course. They are not a description of the process of learning, but rather describe the skills, knowledge or capabilities students can expect to achieve or demonstrate upon successful completion of the course. Learning objectives should reflect the intellectual challenge of university study, but they must reasonably describe performance that is achievable by most students enrolled in the course.

There are several audiences for learning objective statements. Students need to understand the rationale for their course activities and assessment. Staff teaching other courses need information on what they can expect students to have learnt in the course that will be built upon subsequently, or prepared for in prerequisite courses. Staff teaching a course (including tutors and other non-academic colleagues) need a clear description of the intentions and expectations of the course as a component in the programme as a whole.

The objectives should reflect the level of course (eg. 100 level vs 400 level), with higher-level courses emphasising *analysis*, *synthesis* and *evaluation* over *knowledge* and *comprehension*. As a rule of thumb courses should have around 4–5 learning objectives, and certainly no more than 7. Learning objectives are defined and owned by all of the staff teaching within the programme that the course is associated with. Wherever possible, objectives should be developed collegially and with reference to the objectives of other courses in a programme and the graduate attributes of qualifications that the course contributes towards. Care should be taken when updating objectives to ensure that collegial ownership is maintained.

Staff are encouraged to refer to and further elaborate on the course learning objectives throughout the course when describing the activities and assessment to students, particularly when providing marking rubrics or criteria. Objectives can become tools to motivate and orient students because they specify attainable performance. It can also be helpful to relate the learning objectives to those of prerequisite or related courses, and the overall programme graduate attributes, so that students appreciate the pathways between courses in their programme of study.

## Checklist

- Does each learning objective target one specific outcome?
- Does the set of learning objectives address a range of cognitive levels consistent with the level of the course?
- Does each learning objective relate to the overall aims of the course and of the major/programme/qualification(s) the course contributes toward?
- Is each learning objective expressed as student performance—that is, does it describe what a student will be able to do or know?
- Will it be feasible to get evidence of the quality of student performance in relation to each learning objective?

## Phrasing of objectives

It can be helpful to consider Bloom’s taxonomy of objectives (Table; Bloom, 1956) when designing objectives and courses at higher levels should emphasise *Analysis*, *Synthesis* and *Evaluation* over *Knowledge* and *Comprehension*. Objectives should comprise an active verb, its object, and a contextual or conditional phrase. The table on the next page suggests relevant active verbs.

## Learning objective verbs

| Knowing   | Comprehending | Applying    | Analysing     | Synthesising | Evaluating |
|-----------|---------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|------------|
| Write     | Explain       | Use         | Categorise    | Plan         | Judge      |
| List      | Summarise     | Compute     | Compare       | Integrate    | Recommend  |
| Label     | Paraphrase    | Solve       | Contrast      | Formulate    | Critique   |
| Name      | Describe      | Demonstrate | Separate      | Theorise     | Justify    |
| State     | Illustrate    | Construct   | Differentiate | Design       | Check      |
| Define    | Interpret     | Execute     | Organise      | Build        |            |
| Recognise | Classify      | Implement   | Attribute     |              |            |

Avoid the following ambiguous verbs: know, comprehend, understand, appreciate, familiarise, study, be aware, become acquainted with, gain knowledge of, cover, learn, realise.

## Learning objective stems

These example stems are provided to help with the rephrasing of objectives and as an illustration of the principles outlined above. The set of objectives would typically start with a phrase such as "Upon completion of this course, students will/should be able to ..."

### *Knowledge*

- Define ...
- List characteristics of ...

### *Comprehension*

- Illustrate understanding of ... by generating examples of ...
- Describe applications of ...
- Explain the basic principles of ...

### *Application*

- Apply information relevant to ... in effective implementation of ...
- Apply knowledge of information resources and technologies in collecting, accessing, analysing, and using ... in decision-making
- Apply ... to support analysis and decision-making

### *Analysis*

- Use the concepts and tools of ... in the analysis of ...
- Identify situations and issues that require ...
- Compare and contrast ... and ..., so as to determine ...

### *Synthesis*

- Summarise the major criticisms of ...
- Explain the relationship between ... and ... and their impact on ...
- Outline the major principles of ...

### *Evaluation*

- Describe alternative approaches to ... and critique their relative strengths and weaknesses

## References

Bloom, B.S. (Ed.) (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The classification of educational goals: Handbook I, Cognitive Domain*. New York ; Toronto: Longmans, Green.

Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

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