Guidelines for Constructing a Subject-Level Outcomes Document

A few words on the purpose and use of this document
These are guidelines, not regulations. Our purpose in distributing this document is to facilitate a partnership among departments, faculty, and administrators to enhance subject quality and promote appropriate creative and academic freedom.

This information is derived from formal and informal data gathered from the current OBL process at HKIEd as well as professional institutions and organizations engaged in quality initiatives. Some of these bodies include The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, The HKU Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching and Alverno College.

This document represents an ongoing, organic process; at HKIEd, OBL structures and procedures are under development at multiple levels and locations. The goal of every team in writing subject aims and outcomes should be to construct operational documents; however, it is important to recognize that as structures and procedures develop throughout HKIEd, documents and their components will undergo review, revision, and refinement.

Clarification of terms
Programme: The organized course of study that a student undertakes to achieve a degree. Subjects are the principal areas of study within programmes.

Subject: A discipline area within a programme that focuses on a specific interrelated set of content and skill areas.

Module: The primary means of academic interaction for students, a module is a course.
Document Components

While each subject document should possess unique characteristics and content, there are some common components:

- **Aim Statement**
- **Subject Outcomes**
- **Assessment and Evaluation**

**Aim Statement**

- **Definition:** A brief but compelling narrative of one paragraph which identifies the broad objectives the department and subject staff seek to accomplish within the subject. An aims statement may touch on the context, philosophy, and rationale behind these objectives.

- **Purpose:** An aim statement provides a broad view of the approach to a subject. This statement can help staff to focus their intentions for and input into the subject.

- **Characteristics/Criteria:** A subject-level aims statement should be:
  - clear and concise, with achievable objectives that are specific to the subject
  - aligned with the aims of the programme
  - rich, but not verbose; inclusive, but not atomistic
  - aligned philosophically and epistemologically with HKIEd’s mission

**Subject Outcomes (see appendix I for detailed guidance & examples)**

- **Definition:** Subject outcomes (SO’s) are broad, measurable statements that identify how students may meaningfully express proficiency within a subject.

- **Purpose:** Outcomes serve to classify what students are expected to achieve. At the subject level, outcomes serve as an intermediary “step” between the broader institutional mission, goals, and generic outcomes and the more specific and directly measurable outcomes within the modules. SO’s provide a common language for
department/subject staff to hold discussions about student learning within a subject area.

Eames states that a subject-level outcome must answer two critical questions:

- What knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions should the ideal student graduating from our program demonstrate?
- How will they be able to demonstrate these capacities?

(From Developing Learning Objectives, 2003)

Characteristics: SO’s should be:

- appropriate for and centered upon the students within that subject
- broad enough that they may be mapped to multiple module outcomes which demand progressive levels of student proficiency
- specific enough that they clearly identify knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions that are meaningful for and appropriate to the subject-area.
- clearly aligned with the programme outcomes.

SOs are different from aims. Aims center on approach to a subject. By contrast, outcomes center on the achievement students may demonstrate through engaging with a subject.

Organization: departments/teams should organize SO’s according to what is most appropriate to that subject and most useful for mapping SO’s to module outcomes. Some examples of organizing principles include:

- Cluster by content area
- Sequence according to challenge/difficulty
- Sequence according to students’ progress within the subject curriculum

Assessment

Definition: The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education provides the following definition of assessment:
(Assessment is) the systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students... the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students’ learning and development. It includes discussions about what should be assessed and how information will be used, not just the hands-on testing of students (from *Frameworks for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes*, 2006).

Two helpful ways to categorize assessment in relationship to subject outcomes are:

- **Direct assessment**: These are assessment procedures which directly measure achievement of subject outcomes. Some possible direct means of assessment at the subject-level include:
  - subject-level examinations,
  - capstone-projects and papers,
  - imbedded assessments, or imbedded items/item-clusters within assessments.

- **Indirect assessment**: These assessment measures do not directly measure a target, but they may allow the researcher to reasonably infer the degree to which a target has been achieved. Some indirect assessment focuses on perceptual data such as students’ perception of teaching quality, or faculty members’ perception of module efficacy. Some examples of indirect means of assessment at the subject level include:
  - module assessments which measure achievement of module outcomes which “map” to subject outcomes
  - course/instructor evaluations,
  - subject-graduate evaluations,
  - student surveys,
  - alumni surveys,
  - faculty focus groups-

- **Purpose**: The data/evidence from assessment measures may inform faculty and administrative dialogues and contribute to
making informed planning and improvement decisions at multiple levels.

Outcomes at the subject level do not have to be directly measurable. They may be large enough in scope that students do not engage in a specific assessment activity that provides direct evidence of subject outcome achievement.

It is entirely appropriate for faculty to focus on generating *indirect* evidence of subject-level outcome achievement. One important way to do this is to assure that subject outcomes “map” to module level outcomes that are directly measurable.

Can assessment generate evidence of achieving objectives and subject aims? Absolutely. It is critical for faculty to answer questions such as, are we, as instructors approaching the content correctly? Assessment evidence can help faculties to answer this question and act accordingly.

- **Characteristics:** The characteristics of sound assessment procedures are many; this is an abbreviated and general list. At the subject level, assessment should embody:

  - **Utility** by measuring growth in students’ knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions as they progress through the subject and their degree programme.
  - **Validity** through demonstrably measuring what it purports to measure, and the results of that assessment should allow for legitimate and meaningful inferences to be made.
  - **Reliability** by providing the same results under the same circumstances, consistently. The scoring and analytical system should be clear and those using it well-trained in the meaning behind the criteria.
  - **Ethical and Appropriate Use** through administration and interpretation according to appropriate standards. Results must be used ethically towards the benefit of the appropriate educational shareholders.
Collecting appropriate evidence is a commendable start to subject-level assessment. It is necessary, though to go beyond this; departments and subject teams must analyze evidence and then use the results to inform their planning, discussion, revision, and decision-making. Maintaining this ongoing professional dialogue “closes the loop” in the cycle of outcomes-based education and is fundamental to academic quality assurance.
Suggested Outline for a Departmental Subject Outcomes Document

- Subject Aims Statement
- SILOs
- Fig 1 Chart
- Fig 2 Chart
- Fig 3 Chart
- (Fig 4) Direct and indirect assessment processes that will generate evidence of SO achievement.
Appendix I

Subject Outcomes

Some guidelines and examples to aid in constructing Subject Outcomes

- What is the correct number of outcomes? There is no “right” number of SO’s. The list each team constructs should be robust enough that is may comprehensively address the intended student achievement within the subject. Conversely, the list should not be so long that measuring the achievement of SO’s or mapping them to modules becomes an unwieldy or burdensome process.

Striking this balance lies in maintaining appropriate subject outcome language. Each SO should be broad enough to map to multiple module outcomes, but specific enough that each SO addresses a distinct area of the subject. A department/team should typically be able to accomplish this with 8-12 subject outcomes.

- What is the relationship of subject outcomes to the HKIEd generic outcomes/skills? The seven generic outcomes/skills should have a clear relationship to the subject outcomes. The key question is: where and in what ways do the subject outcomes relate to the intended learning within each subject at HKIEd? In table 3, the team can illustrate that relationship.

- What goes into constructing a subject outcome?
  - Subject outcomes should always arise from the subject/discipline itself. A good place to start is for a faculty to come together and ask, what knowledge and skills are critical for students taking this subject?
  - Like any outcome, a subject outcome should contain
    - a clear and desired thought, action attributes, values, dispositions
    - a domain of knowledge, skill, concepts, or theory

- Helpful points/questions to reflect on during construction:
  - What key concepts, facts, principles, theories do we want our students to learn from this subject?
  - What subject-specific skills do my students need to know?
What critical or transferable skills they need do they need to acquire (e.g. skills in problem solving, decision making, communication, social interaction etc) that are critical to their success as lifelong learners?

What personal attributes, values, and dispositions do they need to display?

Examples:

Sociology Outcomes
Students will:

◆ Effectively use sociological concepts and theories to analyze, explain, and address significant social problems and public issues.

◆ **Social scientific research:** Effectively develop and use quantitative & qualitative research to investigate sociological questions/issues.

◆ **Professional interaction:** Apply sociological and communication expertise to interact effectively with people from diverse backgrounds in a variety of academic & community contexts. (Skills include tolerating ambiguity, recognizing multiple perspectives, appreciating individual, cultural and other differences, & adhering to conventional standards of expression).

◆ **Social philosophy:** Articulate your social philosophy and refine it in dialogue with others. (Skills include using sociological perspectives to create criteria for critically examining your own and others’ positions).

Education Subject Outcomes:

Students will:

◆ Integrate content knowledge with educational frameworks and the liberal arts to plan and implement instruction

◆ Manage resources effectively to support learning

◆ Use effective communication and social interaction skills to establish the classroom environment and support learning

◆ Act with professional values and adapting to the changing needs of learners and the environment