



Development and publication of explicit Learning Outcomes at NCAD

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Abstract: In a post Bologna context where implementing modularisation across higher Education is a priority, NCAD had developed resource materials and templates to support the introduction of an outcomes based approach to learning and teaching.

The landscape of higher education has changed significantly in recent years as a result of legislation and policy development in Ireland and at a European level.

At NCAD the introduction of modularisation and learning outcomes, involved the establishment of a modular committee, the delivery of a series of seminars and workshops on learning outcomes, assessment, and constructive alignment. This initial phase of implementation was followed by research initiatives in assessment and the development of learning and teaching resource materials for staff.

External supports and engaging staff internally

In order to engage academic staff at all levels, NCAD invited a consultant from the HEA and Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design (University of the Arts) in the UK who is experienced in the area of writing learning outcomes (los), and assessment within art and design. Colleagues from DIT learning and teaching centre also facilitated workshops for NCAD staff. This initiative was resourced through the HEA strategic funding in teaching and learning.

Seminars and workshops for staff were important forums where questions and concerns could be raised. Staff had reservations about modularisation and an outcomes based approach to learning. The type of questions staff raised included: will modularisation and learning outcomes lead to a reductive, or fragmented curriculum? Will creativity and experimentation be limited by modules and learning outcomes? What about unintended learning outcomes? What happens when students fail modules?

Workshops provided an opportunity for staff to engage in the process of writing learning outcomes. The more staff practise writing los the more confident and accomplished they become. It is important for staff to recognise, writing intended learning outcomes is not about transcribing content into a different format, or being prescriptive. Broadly stated intended learning outcomes are better than finite or definitive statements, particularly within an art and design area.

Also, as intended learning outcomes, can be written at a threshold level, it is crucial to link writing los with assessment methods, criteria, and grade descriptors. Ensuring that these processes are constructively aligned at the time of writing intended learning outcomes reduces problems at a later stage.

Teaching and learning resource materials for staff

The development of module templates emerged out of the process of writing learning outcomes and recognising that there was no college wide template. Based on earlier workshops and seminars with staff, it was possible to develop a draft template, circulate this across college and get feedback.

Following this step a sample template was devised as a guideline for staff engaged in writing modules. This document provides staff with guidelines on all terms used when writing a module, provides examples of learning outcomes and lists of outcome verbs.

This guideline document was accompanied by an 'empty template' to be completed locally by staff in their own time. Both documents have been placed on the college intranet learning and teaching site where there is a range of materials on learning outcomes.

Within the department of continuing education the introduction of modularisation and explicit learning outcomes coincided with the development of new courses and progression routes for mature students. New modularised programmes were developed using the module templates. An annual continuing education brochure is produced which includes details of explicit learning outcomes within courses.

Fundamentally, whether a learning outcomes advocate or sceptic, it is evident, that in a post Bologna context, modularisation, and explicit learning outcomes, are part of a larger process of curriculum change. Where possible, it is important for academic staff in higher education to engage in the discourse around curriculum development and support further research in this area.

