# Guidance Note: *Learning Outcomes and Assessment*

Version 3.1 (DD MM 2021)

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| Providers should note that Guidance Notes are intended to provide guidance only. The definitive instruments for regulatory purposes remain the TEQSA Act and the Higher Education Standards Framework as amended from time to time. |

## What do Learning Outcomes and Assessment encompass?

In the context of the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (Threshold Standards), providers must meet specific requirements related to learning outcomes and assessment.

The primary obligations are found in Section 1.4 of the Threshold Standards. Under Section 1.4, providers are expected to:

* specify and define the type of learning outcomes and assessment a student will have to undertake as part of their course of study
* ensure students have attained the learning outcomes prior to completion of their course of study.
* have assessment methods, which are consistent with the course of study. This includes assessment requirements for major research outputs for higher degrees by research.

Although learning outcomes and assessment are interlinked in what is often referred to a ‘constructive alignment’, for the purposes of this guidance note, learning outcomes and assessment will be discussed separately.

Learning outcomes and assessment in the context of course design is contained in Section 3.1.4 of the Threshold Standards and will only be addressed in passing as part of this guidance note. Additional information about course design is contained the Course Design Guidance Note. [hyperlink forthcoming]

Learning outcomes and assessment in a more general context are dealt with in Section 1.3.3 of the Threshold Standards (Orientation and Progression). While it will be briefly touched on in this guidance note, additional information will be available as part of the Orientation and Progression Guidance Note. [hyperlink forthcoming]

### Learning Outcomes

A learning outcome is a statement of what a student will know, the skills they will learn to apply and the level they will be able to demonstrate the skills at completion of the course.

Learning outcomes not only impact on course design but form the basis of assessment. This includes, the generic and discipline related attributes a provider wishes to foster amongst its students. The use of subject learning outcomes can also assist in the constructive alignment between course content, assessment and course learning outcomes.

The Threshold Standards require a provider to:

* specify the learning outcomes for a course and how they are consistent with the field of study and the qualification awarded
* ensure learning outcomes are informed by national and international comparators
* ensure learning outcomes include discipline-related and generic outcomes, particularly:
  + specific knowledge, skills characteristic of the field of study and the disciplines involved
  + generic skills and their application in the field of study and discipline
  + knowledge and skills for employment and further study
  + skills in independent and critical thinking for lifelong learning.
* ensure at the end of a course of study, students can demonstrate the learning outcomes specified.

Furthermore, providers must also ensure learning outcomes are consistent with graduates meeting relevant criteria set out in the [Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)](https://www.aqf.edu.au/). This is because a graduate cannot be validly awarded an AQF qualification if the criteria are not met. TEQSA regularly utilises the AQF’s level outcome descriptors as a reference point, when determining if an outcome is appropriate for the targeted award.

### Assessment

The standards for assessment used by a provider will depend on the complexity of the field of research and level of the qualification awarded. An assessment may be based on a student showing competency:

* within a broad understanding of the field of research
* in technical skills
* in critical analysis.

A provider is expected to assess a students work, as they progress through a course of study. This is to:

* determine if a student is meeting the learning outcomes for a course
* give students timely feedback to assist them in developing the skills needed to achieve learning outcomes
* monitor a student’s progress to determine if there is a risk of unsatisfactory progress and to provide support.

The Threshold Standards set out the requirements for assessing major research outputs such as dissertations and theses. In assessing major outputs, a provider’s assessment process should incorporate at least two assessors. These assessors should have:

* international standing in the field of research
* independence from the research conducted
* no conflicts of interest.

Depending on the level of the qualification to be awarded based on a research component, assessors may be external or a combination of both internal and external:

* if the research output is for a doctoral degree, assessors must be external to the provider
* if the output is for a master’s degree by research, at least one of the assessors must be external to the provider.

## What TEQSA will look for

The Threshold Standards requires TEQSA to consider the following aspects of a providers learning outcomes and assessment.

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| **Part A: Standards for HE Providers** | **Key considerations** |
| 1.1.1: Admissions | * Information about policies and arrangements for recognised prior learning are made available to prospective students. |
| 1.2: Credit and Recognition of Prior Learning | * To protect the integrity of an award, the provider verifies credits granted via recognised prior learning or advanced standing toward the course of study, feed into the learning outcomes of the course. |
| 1.3.3-4: Orientation and progression | * Students are given feedback on formative assessments within a reasonable time to give them the time and opportunity to address any concerns so they may achieve the learning outcomes * Poor progress of students through a course is identified and monitored and students showing poor progress are provided with adequate support. |
| 1.4.1-5: Learning Outcomes and Assessment | * Learning outcomes for a course are specified to enable students to understand what they are expected to achieve * Assessment methods are consistent with the learning outcomes of the course of study so performance can be measured and verified * Major assessable research outputs are assessed by examiners with appropriate standing * Learning outcomes for a qualification are consistent with the AQF specifications for the qualification level. |
| 3.1.2, 3.1.3 and 3.1.4: Course Design | * Teaching and learning activities in the course support the achievement of learning outcomes * Courses are designed to enable learning outcomes regardless of a student’s place of study or mode of delivery * Learning and assessment is informed by changes, research, and advances at the discipline level, as well as in pedagogical methodology related to that discipline. |
| 3.2.2-3: Staffing | * Staff are equipped to and are allocated sufficient time to effectively deliver learning and assessments relevant to the students’ discipline and level of study. * Through continuing scholarship, staff have skills in contemporary teaching and learning assessment. |
| 5.3.2: Monitoring, Review and Improvement | * The learning outcomes and assessment of a course of study are subject to comprehensive review at least once every seven years to ensure they are up to date and reflect emerging developments in the field of education or in the case of providers without SAA, submission to TEQSA. |
| 7.1: Representation | * Representations of learning outcomes and assessment are accurate and not misleading. |

Important considerations for providers when developing learning outcomes as part of their course design are whether:

* learning outcomes will be clear to other readers, including other staff and students, so they know what needs to be achieved
* the nature, quality, and level of the expected learning outcomes for a course are consistent with:
  + the corresponding AQF level, to ensure an AQF qualification can be awarded if learning outcomes are met
  + national or international comparators, to ensure they reflect expected standards for that course
* there are methods of assessment in place to credibly assess the learning outcomes
* the learning outcomes can be progressively and coherently achieved in line with the design of the course
* it will be able to demonstrate where course learning outcomes are taught, practised, and assessed. This may be at subject or course level, or a combination of the two.
* the assessment of learning outcomes and the resulting grades awarded will accurately reflect the level of student attainment. A provider should consider what activities will demonstrate this, such as moderation exercises, peer reviews, and benchmarking studies
* for research training by higher degrees, it will be able to demonstrate the specification and assessment of learning outcomes for research training are met. This may be shown through:
  + relevant policies and procedures governing the assessment for research degrees, and
  + examples of the implementation of these policies and procedures, such as examination reports
* where required learning outcomes and assessment are designed in a way that allows students to gain the skills and training necessary to gain professional accreditation in their chosen industry.

## Identified issues

Within the context of the Threshold Standards, TEQSA has identified a range of issues which are indicative of risks to learning outcomes and assessment. These include, but are not limited to:

* Course design
  + inadequate alignment between subject learning outcomes and course learning outcomes leading to poor course development and constructive alignment
  + providers confusing course learning outcomes with graduate attributes[[1]](#footnote-2)
  + assessment types and weightings are unaligned with learning outcomes and the requirements of the AQF, risking the award of qualifications that are not legitimate
  + redundant or duplicate learning outcomes risking impact to the perceived validity of the course, and over-assessment of some outcomes
  + learning outcomes describe a specific task or assessment rather than an outcome.
* Course delivery
  + learning outcomes not being delivered or being poorly delivered through the course of study
  + course assessments do not effectively measure the achievement of learning outcomes risking degradation in overall course quality.
* Monitoring, review, and improvement
  + learning outcomes not being informed by national and international comparators impacting the currency, demand for and reputation of the course.

## Related Resources

* Guidance note: Orientation and Progression (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* Guidance note: Course Design (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* Guidance note: Academic Monitoring, Review and Improvement (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* [Guidance note: Research and Research Training](https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/guidance-note-research-and-research-training)
* [Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)](https://www.aqf.edu.au/framework/aqf-levels)

| **Version #** | **Date** | **Key changes** |
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1. TEQSA defines Graduate Attributes as generic learning outcomes that refer to transferable, non-discipline skills that a graduate may achieve through learning that have application in study, work and life contexts. See definition in [TEQSA Glossary](https://www.teqsa.gov.au/guides-resources/glossary-terms). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)