

# CORE COMPETENCE AND LEARNING OUTCOME SPECIFICATION POLICY

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## 1. Purpose

Teaching and learning at ADA University are outcome oriented. They are based on a set of core competencies that provide a point of reference for all the University's degree programs and on program- and course-level learning outcomes that align with these competencies. The main objective is for students to achieve specific learning outcomes and acquire essential competencies. To foster and assess student success, the level of student achievement of learning outcomes needs to be evaluated according to clearly defined criteria.

The purpose of this policy is to outline procedures and requirements for the specification of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and grade descriptions on the level of programs and/or courses.

## 2. Scope and Recommendations

This policy applies to all degree programs (including the *Foundation Program* and the *English for Academic and Professional Purposes Program*) and to all courses offered at ADA University.

This document should be read in conjunction with ADA University's *Degree Program Development and Modification Policy*, its *Curriculum and Course Development Policy*, and its *Statement of Core Competencies*.

## 3. Definitions

In accordance with the *European Reference Framework* of 2007, *Competence* is defined as "a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes". *Core Competencies* are general statements of qualities that a student is expected to demonstrate upon graduation, and this regardless of a specific degree program.

Core competencies are further specified by learning outcomes. *Learning Outcomes* are more detailed statements of what a student is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate upon the completion of a course or degree program.

*Program Objectives* are general statements that describe the broad goals of a program and the competencies students are expected to have acquired upon graduation. They draw on the core competencies set forth in ADA University's *Statement of Core Competencies*.

*Curriculum Mapping* is a process in which program learning outcomes are sequentially and coherently distributed across the courses of a specific degree program.

A *Curriculum Map* indicates in which of its courses the program's learning outcomes are taught and assessed.

*Assessment Criteria* delineate precise requirements for the achievement of learning outcomes. These requirements are clearly defined statements of what a student is expected to demonstrate

during or at the end of a process of learning in order to have partly or fully achieved a specific learning outcome. They thus provide detailed guidelines for the evaluation of assessment tasks.

*Grade Descriptors* are terms (such as *excellent*, *satisfactory*, or *academic fail*) that serve to express a student's level of performance in a specific assessment task, course or unit of study (for details, see ADA University's *Student Assessment Regulations*).

*Grade Descriptions* provide definitions of grade descriptors. Grade descriptions are based on the level on which learning outcomes are achieved. This level of achievement is indicated by the extent to which assessment criteria are fulfilled. The latter presupposes that learning outcomes and assessment methods are aligned (for details, see ADA University's *Student Assessment Regulations*).

A *Grading Rubric* is a scoring guide that allows for the precise evaluation of student performance in a specific assignment. It further specifies (subdivides) grade descriptors and thus explicates the achievement of grade scale percentages and the allocation of grade points.

#### 4. General Provisions

- 4.1 The procedures and requirements delineated in this policy tie in with chapters 4.2.e and 4.3.e of the University's *Curriculum and Course Development Policy*. They apply both to the development and to the modification of (degree) programs and courses.
- 4.2 In line with chapter 4.1.a of the policy mentioned above, the responsibility for the specification of core competencies and learning outcomes on the level of programs and/or courses rests with the faculty of the School or Schools involved in the delivery of a degree program. It may be delegated to the Curriculum Committee(s) of the respective School(s). Schools are recommended to allocate the development of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and grade descriptions on the level of courses to small groups of faculty members involved in the delivery of specific courses.
- 4.3 The results of the activities described below in chapters 5 and 6 must be included in the *Program Description Form* and the *Course Syllabus Form* respectively, both of which can be found in Appendix II of ADA University's *Academic Quality Assurance Standards and Guidelines* (for details, see chapter 4.4. of the *Curriculum and Course Development Policy*).
- 4.4 Those specifying competencies and learning outcomes are advised that not all program learning outcomes need to be represented in each individual course. Yet, each course must reflect them adequately and ensure that the entire process of teaching, learning and assessment is fully aligned with the selected outcomes. Courses form part of degree programs, and it is through each program and its coherent structure of courses that the Schools must ensure that outcomes (and ultimately core competencies) are comprehensively covered.
- 4.5 Throughout the process of core competence and learning outcome specification, the Office of Quality Assurance and Accreditation will assume an advisory function, the Quality Assurance Committee an oversight function (see chapter 4.1.c of the *Curriculum and Course Development Policy*).
- 4.6 It is the particular responsibility of the Office of Quality Assurance and Accreditation to provide and regularly review a *Guide to Learning Outcomes* that provides clear and easy-to-follow guidance to faculty in the specification of core competencies and learning outcomes.
- 4.7 As outlined in chapter 4.1.b of the *Curriculum and Course Development Policy*, the process of competence and learning outcome specification needs to involve the external faculty consultant(s) and potential further stakeholders referred to in chapters 4.2.b and 4.6.d of the University's *Degree Program Development and Modification Policy*. In the case of dual degree programs, and as set forth in chapters 8.3 and 8.4 of the latter policy, the external perspective will be provided by one or more member(s) of the partner institution.

- 4.8 It is the responsibility of Deans, Associate Deans and Program Directors to ensure that the procedures delineated in this policy are fully implemented and that program objectives, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and grade descriptions are phrased adequately and based on the requirements set forth in this document. This also includes the appropriate distribution of learning outcomes throughout programs.

## 5. Procedures and Requirements for the Program Level

### 5.1 Program Objectives

- a. Each (degree) program requires clearly defined program objectives. These must be geared to and adequately reflect the respective program.
- b. The program objectives must be phrased coherently and be well structured. They must clearly relate to the core competencies set forth in the University's *Statement of Core Competencies* and include information at least on the program's structure and duration, its scope and subject matter (content), on the qualifications gained by students upon graduation, and on their employment opportunities after graduation. The program objectives may incorporate further information relevant to a program.

### 5.2 Program Learning Outcomes

- a. Each (degree) program requires clearly defined learning outcomes. These must be informed by and aligned with the program's objectives.
- b. Most program learning outcomes must clearly relate to and systematically reflect the core competencies set forth in the University's *Statement of Core Competencies*. The achievement of program learning outcomes thus allows students to acquire the expected competencies. This also means that (program) learning outcomes, as opposed to competencies, need to be phrased so that they are measurable (as outlined below). The achievement of competencies is assessed by assessing the achievement of clearly measurable learning outcomes.
- c. When aligning program learning outcomes with competencies, faculty may either allocate each learning outcome to one competence, or they may create a list of learning outcomes that, taken together, cover all core competencies. They may also decide on a combination of both options.
- d. Faculty may also define additional and program-specific learning outcomes that do not directly relate to the University's core competencies.
- e. Since familiarity with a program's subject matter is a precondition for the achievement of more advanced learning outcomes, which (in turn) are crucial for the achievement of essential competencies, faculty must ensure that knowledge-related learning outcomes are sufficiently incorporated into the program.
- f. When developing the systematic compilation of learning outcomes for a program, faculty are recommended to consider the 3 different domains of learning (cognitive, affective, psychomotor) where appropriate.
- g. Program learning outcomes must clearly relate to international points of reference. More particularly, they must draw on and significantly reflect the standards and requirements defined for learning outcomes by a relevant and renowned international agency that is accrediting programs. Faculty may decide to consult and adhere to further standards and requirements of the selected agency when developing program objectives, course learning outcomes, assessment criteria and grade descriptions as outlined above in chapter 5.1 and below in chapter 6.
- h. If required, the Office of Quality Assurance and Accreditation will support faculty in selecting relevant accrediting agencies. Should no such agency exist, learning outcomes for a program will be developed by faculty in close collaboration with the Office.

- i. Program learning outcomes must be specified in a manner that aligns with the *Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)* revised in 2018, and the *National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Azərbaycan Respublikasının Ömürboyu Təhsil üzrə Milli Kvalifikasiya Çərçivəsi)*. They must thus be tailored to the level of a program (undergraduate or graduate), which ensures that graduates acquire qualifications that are appropriate to this level. This also ensures a coherent connection between the different levels, allowing for a gradual deepening of learning and of the qualifications acquired by students.
- j. For undergraduate degree programs, it is recommended that program learning outcomes are phrased on 3 different aspiration levels, namely *Introductory (I)*, *Developed (D)*, and *Proficient (P)*. For each learning outcome, this would result in one general program learning outcome and its specification on a maximum of 3 levels.
- k. For graduate degree programs, it is equally recommended to phrase program learning outcomes on up to 3 aspiration levels (*I, D, P*) while ensuring a smooth transition from the undergraduate to the graduate level that reflects the descriptions of different qualification cycles (undergraduate and graduate) outlined in the *QF-EHEA* referred to above in 5.2.i. This can be done by (for instance) considering the proficient aspiration level of undergraduate programs as equivalent to the introductory aspiration level of graduate programs. Faculty are free to develop alternative solutions to the implementation of the *QF-EHEA* and the alignment of the undergraduate and graduate level, provided that these solutions allow for a gradual deepening and progression of learning and of the qualifications acquired by students.
- l. The elaboration of program learning outcomes on different aspiration levels may alternatively be done when specifying program learning outcomes for individual courses as outlined below in 6.1.
- m. The proficient aspiration level of a program learning outcome reflects the full achievement of this outcome during or at the end of a program. Faculty must ensure that learning outcomes essential to a program reach the proficient level, while other learning outcomes may remain on the introductory or developed level.
- n. The specification of program learning outcomes on up to 3 aspiration levels will allow for a sequential and coherent distribution of learning outcomes across the courses of a degree program as outlined below in 5.3. Schools thus ensure that the gradual fulfillment of learning outcomes throughout a program allows students to achieve all the program's learning outcomes on the envisaged aspiration level. Students are thus also able to acquire all the University's core competencies upon graduation and according to the level of their degree program. As is the case with learning outcomes, the level of achievement of specific core competencies may vary and depend on the field of a program.
- o. Program learning outcomes must be phrased so that they are adequate to a program and its subject matter.
- p. Each program learning outcome must consist of a complete sentence with one or more active and measurable verb(s), which is (are) followed by one or several objects (nouns). The verbs and objects of learning outcomes must be clear and precise.
- q. When phrasing learning outcomes, faculty are strongly recommended to consult a revised version of *Bloom's Taxonomy*, keep learning outcomes short, and avoid complicated sentences.
- r. While making sure that program learning outcomes cover all the University's competencies as well as the essentials of a program, faculty are to avoid overloading programs with learning outcomes.
- s. When specifying learning outcomes for dual degree programs, faculty need to cooperate closely with faculty members from the partner institution. While learning outcomes across programs (including dual degree programs) need to form a well-structured and coherent whole, ADA University, at the same time, acknowledges differences between institutions in

terms of their approaches to learning outcomes. As a result, faculty need to be flexible when specifying learning outcomes for dual degree programs. They may need to define relations of equivalence while trying to ensure that the University's core competencies are fully covered by the program's learning outcomes.

### 5.3 The Curriculum Map

- a. After having completed the specification of program learning outcomes as outlined above in 5.2, the program's curriculum map must be set up.
- b. The curriculum map will indicate in which of the program's courses specific learning outcomes are taught and assessed. Since courses may place more emphasis on some learning outcomes and less on others, the map will (for each course) provide the following information: *No Emphasis (-)*, *Some Emphasis (1)*, or *Strong Emphasis (2)*.
- c. The curriculum map will (for each course) also indicate the level on which the respective learning outcome is taught and assessed: *Introductory (I)*, *Developed (D)*, or *Proficient (P)*.
- d. The curriculum map must cover all the program's (major core and major elective) courses and all its learning outcomes. It must ensure that the program's learning outcomes are distributed sequentially and coherently across the courses of the program. Students should thus be able to experience a gradual learning progress across all courses and learning outcomes.
- e. Since the *Foundation Program* is an integral part of all undergraduate degree programs, its curriculum map serves as a starting point for the curriculum maps of all undergraduate programs. When developing the curriculum map of an undergraduate program, faculty must thus ensure that it is well aligned and integrated with the *Foundation Program's* curriculum map.
- f. The same does not apply to the *English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP) Program*. Since newly admitted undergraduate students only need to complete this program if their English level is insufficient, not all of them will attend (and fulfill the learning outcomes of) the *EAPP Program*. Yet, since those students exempt from the *EAPP Program* are so because of an adequate level of English acquired before enrolling at ADA University, faculty may (when developing the curriculum map of an undergraduate degree program) assume a level of English proficiency that is sufficient for all students attending classes of the respective program. Details on the *EAPP Program* (and on the level of English considered to be sufficient for enrollment in an undergraduate degree program) can be found in ADA University's *English for Academic and Professional Purposes Regulations*.
- g. When developing a curriculum map for a dual degree program, faculty need to consider the learning outcomes covered in courses offered by the partner institution. This may again require to define relations of equivalence while identifying courses of the partner institution in which program learning outcomes are taught and assessed.

## 6. Procedures and Requirements for the Course Level

### 6.1 Course Learning Outcomes

- a. Once the curriculum map has been finalized, learning outcomes must be specified for each of the program's courses.
- b. By drawing on the program's curriculum map, course learning outcomes are based on and clearly relate to those defined for the program.
- c. Courses may incorporate learning outcomes beyond those defined for the program. This also means that not all course learning outcomes need to be reflected on the level of the program.

- d. When developing course learning outcomes throughout a program, faculty must find an adequate balance between fundamental knowledge-related learning outcomes (that are required for the achievement of more advanced learning outcomes), and more advanced learning outcomes (that lead to the achievement of essential competencies).
- e. When developing learning outcomes for individual courses, and if appropriate, faculty may consider the 3 different domains of learning (cognitive, affective, psychomotor).
- f. Course learning outcomes must precisely address the context and subject matter of a course. They are thus more specific than program learning outcomes, which must cover the entire spectrum of a program.
- g. If based on a program learning outcome, course learning outcomes must precisely reflect the aspiration level envisaged in the program's curriculum map.
- h. If based on a program learning outcome, course learning outcomes must preserve the basic structure of the corresponding program learning outcome. Most particularly, course learning outcomes may not change the verb (or verbs) given in program learning outcomes. The adjustment of the latter to the level of courses thus requires that the object (or objects) is (are) adapted to suit the context of the course and reflect its subject matter. On the introductory (and potentially developed) level of aspiration, however, course learning outcomes may omit higher-level verbs.
- i. When phrasing learning outcomes on the level of courses, and similar to the program-level, faculty are strongly recommended to keep learning outcomes short, avoid complicated sentences, and keep the number of learning outcomes realistic and manageable.
- j. In the case of course learning outcomes that do not draw on those defined for the program, faculty are additionally strongly recommended to consult a revised version of *Bloom's Taxonomy*.
- k. When developing course learning outcomes for dual degree programs, faculty may need to collaborate with faculty members of the partner institution.

## **6.2 Assessment Criteria and Grade Descriptions**

- a. Once course learning outcomes have been specified, assessment criteria must be defined for each of these learning outcomes. Assessment criteria must precisely reflect the respective learning outcome and be tailored towards its level.
- b. Grade descriptions must be defined for each assessment criterion and for different grade descriptors. Grade descriptions must clearly address the respective assessment criterion and specify the level of student achievement.
- c. Each time a course is being taught, grading rubrics must be developed for each graded assignment by the teacher of the course. They must clearly relate to and reflect the assessment criteria and grade descriptions defined for the course. Grading rubrics must be detailed and precise and be made available to students ahead of assignments.

## **7. Addendum: The School Level**

### **7.1 Requirements for School Missions**

- a. Each School of ADA University must have a clear mission. Since a School's mission is to cover all the degree programs taught at that School, it is by necessity more general in nature than program objectives.
- b. School missions are to be phrased in a coherent and well-structured manner. They are to be aligned with the University's mission, and they need to reflect the core competencies set forth in the University's *Statement of Core Competencies*.
- c. A School mission is thus a broad statement of the School's purposes and of the most significant competencies that its graduates are expected to acquire during their studies of any of the School's (degree) programs.



- d. School missions must also provide further information relevant to students, the general public, and other interested parties. This must at least include information on the School's scope of program offerings, on School and/or program accreditation (if applicable), and on memberships in (for example) associations (if applicable).

## **7.2 Development and Modification of School Missions**

- a. Responsibility for the development and modification of a School's mission rests with all of that School's (academic and administrative) members.
- b. The modification of a School's mission may be initiated by any group of School members, by senior management members of ADA University, or by any decision-making body (such as the University Senate, Deans' Council or Committee of Faculty Affairs) or an academic committee (such as the Quality Assurance Committee or the School's Curriculum Committee) of the University.
- c. Proposals for a newly developed or modified School mission need the approval of (1) the majority of the School's (academic and administrative) members, (2) the Committee of Faculty Affairs, (3) the Deans' Council, and (4) the University Senate in order to become effective. If accepted by the Senate and approved by the Rector, the proposed modification comes into effect at the date determined by the Senate.