

## Moving to the Enhanced Outline Course Descriptor A Practical Guide

The purpose of the Programme and Course Information Management (PCIM) initiative is to provide our students with greater clarity about the information we produce for them in relation to their programmes and courses of study and, as a general principle, we are seeking to change our approach in writing outline course descriptors to make them more student focused, accessible and understandable. In particular at the lower SCQF levels 7 and 8 many students will be selecting courses to study a subject for the first time at University level and in this context clarity and understandability of what they can expect from the course is of particular importance.

Since the beginning of the PCIM project our course selector and programme builder portal (PATH) has now been rolled-out across the University and is proving extremely popular with students and staff alike in facilitating course selection. PATH is highly dependent on the quality and completeness of the information held within each course descriptor, drawing upon the 'golden copy' information held in the central student system. This is the opportunity to ensure that our course information fully reflects what was intended and, importantly, that all of the data fields are complete.

Managing the process of moving from one approach of course description to another, whilst reconciling the old and new templates in the system, will undoubtedly present challenges.

It is with this in mind that the following approach has been adopted:

1. We are adhering to the same timeline as is normally followed for the course roll-forward and any changes that would routinely be made during this period will occur as previously planned.

*If no changes are made to the existing course descriptor, it will still appear in the new template with all of the information captured and displayed in the same or corresponding new field. The new presentation style however will make any gaps in the data more noticeable and, in particular, the learning outcomes will not display correctly if they are currently written in paragraph form.*

2. One of the main changes we are seeking to achieve is to extrapolate the learning outcomes and present them individually in a clearly defined, numbered list.

*The reason for this is to make more explicit the relationship between what students are expected to learn and the type(s) of assessment used to test and evidence this. The ability to clearly identify what has been achieved or where students have failed will enable more tailored opportunities for re-assessment for example.*

3. CSPC has recently agreed that each course should have no more than **five** clearly defined learning outcomes.

*These specific but overarching learning outcomes are intended to describe the broad category of learning taking place and not the detailed learning objectives which students may be required to evidence: for example, to meet a PSRB competency requirement - i.e. reducing the overarching learning*

*outcomes to a maximum of five per course does not in any way restrict the number of detailed learning objectives which would all be assessed as normally required. Course handbooks should be used to make explicit the relationships between the overarching learning outcomes, the detailed learning objectives and, importantly, where and what type of assessment or assessments will be used to test and evidence these.*

4. To facilitate the change to the enhanced course descriptor we need to adopt a pragmatic and 'light-touch' approvals approach.

*The priority is to move the outline description of our courses to the new template as efficiently as is possible and to ensure in the first instance completeness in all the data fields and separation of learning outcomes.*

5. To accommodate the change from the old format to the new there is no need for Board of Studies approval where the following does not change:
  - a. The name of the course
  - b. The level of the course
  - c. The credit value
  - d. The aims of the course
  - e. The learning outcomes
  - f. The assessment types and ratio
  - g. Home Subject Area

*The categories outlined above are regarded as major change not because they are more important but because they potentially impact significantly on students and other interdependent processes if they were routinely changed locally in the absence of an approvals process with a formal link to central student systems.*

*All other categories do not have to be formally approved before changes are made to the descriptor and, for example, learning resources, reading lists, outline syllabus, core reading and course topics could routinely be refreshed in accordance with normal School and discipline procedures.*

6. One of the key aspirations for the new course descriptor is to provide information on how the course is taught, the type of learning experience students are expected to have, what is expected of them and, importantly, an outline of the formative and summative assessment and feedback strategies.

*Within the main course description there should be sufficient information to let students know what the aims of the course are, how the course will be taught and what the study patterns and frequency of assignments/hand-ins are. Related to this is what the expectations are for students regarding engaging with their studies. For example, are students required to prepare and submit material in advance of their lectures or interactive sessions such as in the flipped-classroom model?*

*An important inclusion in the new descriptor is to make explicit how formative assessment and associated feedback is structured and scheduled across the course and how this relates to the final summative assessment.*

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