INTENDED LEARNING
OUTCOMES

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Intended Learning Outcomes are a key aspect of programme accreditation yet they seem to cause many schools and programme directors considerable difficulty or even resistance. **Chris Greensted** and **Ulrich Hommel** examine the issues

Put simply, ILOs are a statement of what a student will know and be able to do at the end of a (degree) programme or at the end of each component course (module) of the degree. This definition of ILOs is easy to say but it is not so easy to develop ILOs in practice.

In the "good old days", programme designers used to write out the programme objectives and ask faculty members to write course objectives consistent with them. Faculty then developed a syllabus for their course and possibly a supplementary note on how the course would be assessed.

There was an expectation that in this way the programme objectives would be achieved but there was no guarantee that this process would work. The problem with programme objectives is that they do not show how achieving them will be implemented and measured.

We can take an analogy from cookery. The objective is to bake a cake. The equivalent of the syllabus is the list of ingredients for the cake but with no measures given and no recipe. Different cooks will produce different cakes with the same ingredients and sometimes no cake at all.

To ensure a consistent cake from all the cooks there needs to be a recipe that includes measures and process. Even then, the quality of the cake may vary but at least the product is recognisable as a cake resembling the picture in the book!

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Learning outcomes are essentially about performance and they are the implementation tools for the objectives. So it is necessary to have both objectives and ILOs. The programme objectives statement is likely to be quite short, stating what the programme is aiming to achieve and for whom.

Programme-level ILOs are derived from the objectives and serve as the starting point for the curriculum design. Then there should be a coherent structure of ILOs at programme and course levels. Achievement at programme level will ensure that the programme's objectives are met while achievement of ILOs for each course will ensure that overall the programme or degree ILOs have also been achieved.

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For example, a Masters in International Marketing might have the objective of providing participants with a in-depth knowledge of marketing management from multiple perspectives and the skills to meet the challenges inherent in a dynamic international context.

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The programme ILOs might include (non-exhaustively):

• Demonstrate a mastery of the knowledge and skills required for an entry-level position in international marketing

• Identify, define and deal with problems that may arise in their future professional role as a marketer

• Function effectively as a leader and as a member of a marketing team

These ILOs may be seen as some of the abilities that a masters graduate should possess in order to be able to take on a specialist marketing role. In turn, these ILOs can only be achieved by undertaking a number of courses whose own ILOs will build up towards achieving the programme ILOs.

However, each course also needs a syllabus showing the course content (what will be studied) and statements on teaching/learning methods (how the knowledge and skills will be imparted) and on assessment (how achievement of the ILOs will be measured).

Overall the structure of ILOs should ensure alignment between programme objectives, content, methodology of delivery and assessment methods and result in a coherent match between market needs and the "end product" – the graduate.

So, who uses or values ILOs?

Students – because they will have (from the start of their degree) a fuller understanding of how a degree programme will enable them to achieve their personal goal of becoming, for example, a professional marketer or prepare them for future study or some other goal.

Employers – because they will understand the knowledge and abilities that they can expect a graduate would have on entering their organisation. If these expectations are met, the reputation of the school will be enhanced.

Programme managers – because they will have a clear structure of how the programme and its courses fit together logically and how intellectual progression is achieved during the degree programme. ILOs provide a framework for programme design.

Faculty / teachers – because they will see how their courses fit into the overall design in terms of links with other courses, including identifying potential reinforcing overlaps or redundancies. ILOs provide a clear statement of the learning the teachers expect (or are expected) to impart to students. For courses taught by a team of teachers (especially when including adjunct faculty), ILOs provide a coherent mechanism for ensuring commonality of achievement by students. It also allows for the relatively smooth transition into the team of new faculty.
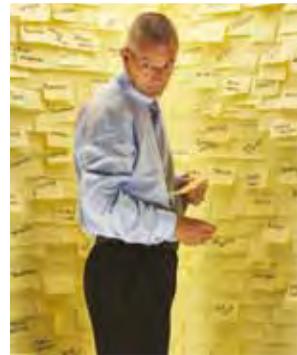
Quality assurance authorities – because an effective ILOs structure should ensure that a degree programme achieves its stated objectives.

The process for developing ILOs will vary by institutional practice and by types of degree and subject area. While there are no hard rules for the development process, there are a few principles.

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- There should not be too many ILOs at either programme or course levels. Probably there should be no more than eight programme ILOs and perhaps six ILOs for each course. Not all learning can be directly measured – for example some aspects of personal development – and so proxy measures need to be employed to verify learning achievements such as pointed and regular feedback from employers.

- The ILOs should be described by the use of *doing* or *action* verbs whose execution can be measured. Verbs such as *understand* are too vague and do not allow depth of learning to be specified. They would be better replaced by verbs such as *explain* or *describe*. It is possible to strengthen these verbs by qualifying adverbs in order to measure different levels of performance and progression.

- The assessment methods and their relative weight may vary across courses and will depend on the respective ILOs defined for each course.

The higher-education community has produced a rich knowledge base on ILOs, which is freely available in the public domain. Learning from best-practice examples is the most effective way of developing a workable system of ILOs. As discussed below, it involves much more than just identifying good ways of expressing ILOs.

There are, of course, always objectors who may see ILOs as the foe or enemy. These are some of the arguments raised for not using ILOs:

- In some academic cultures ILOs are an alien or unknown concept and there is therefore resistance to change – what is the point of ILOs since students already graduate with good degrees and are attractive to employers? This may be so but ILOs add value through the additional information they supply to students and employers.

- The process should be one of consensus or agreement since the resulting ILOs must satisfy the needs of the various users. It would be unwise for programme management to set the programme ILOs in isolation from the faculty delivering the courses since faculty probably do not like having ILOs imposed on them. Top-down does not work. Equally, a bottom-up approach would lead to a disparate set of ILOs from which it would be impossible to define a coherent set of programme ILOs. A programme team approach seems to work more effectively so that the issues can be properly discussed and agreed.

- It should be clear how the course ILOs make a contribution to the achievement of the programme ILOs and there should be a mechanism for showing how they fit together. This could be demonstrated by a matrix structure although there are also other devices.

• ILOs are sometimes seen as a restriction on academic freedom, on what and how faculty teach. However, the specification of programme ILOs, defining the contribution of different courses and making the links between assessment methods and course-level ILOs, should be an iterative process that does not infringe upon the academic freedom of each teacher but allows for group discussion and involvement.

• Some faculty believe that knowledge for its own sake is enough and that one only needs to examine that knowledge. Unfortunately that does not show what the graduate will actually be able to do. ILOs may be too focused on employability, e.g. as the result of governmental pressures to ensure that graduates are productive in society (which ignores the value of knowledge for its own sake). That is perhaps a consequence of the move to mass higher education. However, ILOs cannot be achieved without knowledge; they do not downplay the value of knowledge but they do give it purpose.

• The process of developing ILO is sometimes seen as too bureaucratic and time consuming but it should be intellectually stimulating and enriching.

Many business schools are struggling to use ILOs effectively. The following are some examples of problems that arise in specifying ILOs.

• A typical starting point of things going wrong is employing ILOs as a post-rationalisation device for existing teaching and learning practices. Overly generic programme-level ILOs and omitting course-level counterparts are typically signs of programme managers aiming to tick the box in the early stages of external review exercises. When faculty is then confronted with the task of specifying ILOs, it is perceived as yet another bureaucratic layer keeping them away from their actual work. This indicates that faculty are not sufficiently communicating what should be accomplished in the programme.

If, in contrast, faculty engage in a regular and in-depth dialogue about programme design and delivery, then ILOs will flow almost naturally out of these discussions. Faculty will then appreciate such a process as a way of structuring their discussions and going beyond the simple co-ordination of course content lists.

• There lies a danger in becoming overly obsessed with the measurement of achieved learning outcomes. It can lead to a culture where only those aspects that are explicitly quantifiable are also managed, implying that other important aspects of student learning fall off the radar screen. Programme managers should instead search for proxy measures (which may be very qualitative) to verify that students have achieved their learning goals.

Personal development, for instance, can be discussed with employer representatives in face-to-face focus group exercises. The feedback could serve as an important input for comprehensive programme review rather than for the on-going evaluation of assessment policies and outcomes. Information on learning achievements may therefore be collected asynchronously and will then feed into different aspects of programme management. Adding complexity here is actually very desirable and can raise the effectiveness of ILOs considerably.

• Students frequently have a limited awareness of the meaning and relevance of ILOs. In order for them to perceive this information as tangible guidance for their studies, ILOs need to be linked to the students' understanding of potential career paths and placement services. In other words, the proper use of ILOs from the students' perspective requires an active engagement by career services from programme initiation to graduation. Admittedly, considerable staff support may be required but the rewards in terms of student satisfaction should easily compensate for the expense.

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• Faculty sometimes tends to display a "we know best" attitude and may fail to recognise that alumni and corporate partners can help to make teaching a more rewarding experience overall. Carefully planned interaction points with HR managers, other functional specialists and alumni in relevant professional roles represent a motivational force for the "classroom", which all too often remains underutilised. Stakeholder orientation contributes to the achievement of ILOs and can also help in designing them in the first place, for instance by including stakeholder perspectives in regular programme reviews.

• While the design of an ILO hierarchy may be straightforward for programmes without any specialisation options, it can become considerably more complex if students can choose majors and minors. In extreme cases, a general management programme may even serve as an umbrella for a host of specialised programmes without separate degree designations. In order to capture the richness of learning outcomes, it will be necessary to place an additional layer of ILOs between programme and course level, ie at major level. To put it differently, business schools should not religiously stick to externally provided templates but rather work with a structure that really satisfies their specific needs.

Intended learning outcomes provide a clear structure that provides information on the programme objectives or goals showing how these are achieved through programme ILOs. In turn, these are cascaded down to course ILOs level, which then guide course level assessments. Many experienced faculty would say that the use of ILOs has considerably strengthened the coherence of their programmes and the component courses. ILOs have become friends of the stakeholders and not the foes foreseen!

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Greensted and Ulrich Hommel are Senior Advisors in the EFMD Quality Services Department.