University of Suffolk

WRITING MODULE SPECIFICATIONS: A GUIDE

This guide is designed to support course teams in preparing module specifications for course validation and re-approval events. We look at each section of the specification template and review what should be included, and discuss possible formats that could be used.

Within the course handbook, there should be a specification for each module that will form part of the course. Teams should take care to ensure that where a module is delivered in different forms (for example, to some students with a work-place element and to others without), that this is made clear. Usually this is best achieved by providing two different module specifications, one for each.

It is wise for a course team to adopt a consistent approach to developing module specifications. Some of the presentation can be done in a variety of styles, and to have too much variety in approach makes the course look disparate and lacking in cohesion. One possible approach is for one team member to write a sample specification that the team considers before embarking on their own writing tasks, adopting a similar style.

The module specification is presented in two parts: the main content represents the definitive record of the module and as such can only normally be changed through the formal approval of a course modification. A supplementary section provides reading lists for consideration by validation and re-approval panels. This section is not presented to students, with reading lists instead provided through the Library system.

Module specification heading

The heading of each module specification should specify the required elements as set out:

Module title

Module code: This may not be allocated at the point of validation – if not, then this may be left blank. However, a code should be included when the module specification is presented to students within the course handbook.

Level: This refers to the level of study, in accordance with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Undergraduate levels are 4 to 6; Master's level is 7.

Credits: This refers to the credit value of the module, which is usually a multiple of 20. A standard module is normally valued at 20 credits and a final dissertation or research project module is normally valued at 40 credits (at undergraduate level) or 60 credits (at taught postgraduate level). Exceptionally, the coherence of the curriculum may necessitate the incorporation of one or more 10, 40 or 60 credit modules (for example in relation to practice learning, work-related learning or professional practice in the creative arts).

Total study hours: This indicates the total amount of time that students should spend studying on the module. In accordance with national expectations, there should be 10 study hours for each credit point. Thus, for a 20 credit module there should be 200 total study hours; for a 40 credit module there should be 400 study hours.

Study hours breakdown: In addition to providing the total study hours, an indication of the make-up of the hours across the whole module should be made. For example:

– 12 hours lectures; 24 hours workshops; 12 hours group and individual tutorials; 152 hours independent study (for a 20 credit module)

– 20 hours class time; 6 hours individual tutorials; 374 hours project work and private study (for a 40 credit module)

– 24 hours lectures and seminars; 4 hours individual or group tutorials; 24 hours guided VLE learning; 148 hours independent study (for a 20 credit module).

The following comments might help you think through the number of contact hours you might wish to adopt on modules:

i) There is no reason why all modules should have the same level of contact hours. Indeed, it is common at Level 6 for the dissertation (or equivalent) module to have very low contact hours (typically 10-15 hours for a 40 credit module) and a focus on independent study, whilst other modules at the same level might have 36 hours per 20 credits. Some courses might choose to dedicate a high level of resources to a core Level 4 module, to ensure sufficient contact hours for students to develop key practice or study skills as a foundation for the remainder of their study.

ii) The contact hours should include time allocated for academic tutorials, which should form part of all modules in some way.

iii) Many courses reflect the increasing independence of students as they progress through a course by allowing higher contact hours at Level 4 and then decreasing through the programme. For example, it is not unusual for a lecture and seminar-based course to allocate 60 hours per 20 credits at Level 4, 48 hours at Level 5 and 36 hours at Level 6.

iv) Contact hours need to be practical in terms of availability of rooms and, where relevant, specialist resources – we should never indicate that a module requires a number of hours within a specialist room if we do not have confidence that this is possible from a timetabling perspective.

v) We must consider the student experience and their expectations. Putting in too many contact hours can encourage dependency; too few hours can result in a lack of opportunities for confidence to be built. Students will also gain an impression of relative values of content if their experience of modules differs. For example, allocating a substantial number of contact hours to a particular module might indicate to students that this is a more important aspect of the course and thus lead them to pay insufficient attention to other modules.

vi) Allocation of hours must take into account the availability of staff – remembering that whilst some delivery patterns have the same resource requirements regardless of student numbers (i.e. lectures), others will grow in proportion to student numbers (i.e. seminars and one-to-one supervision). Some partner colleges routinely allocate 36

contact hours per 20 credits at all levels to align with internal staffing policies and contracts. Similarly, some courses might recognise the varying nature of their teaching and learning strategies and so allocate hours accordingly, ensuring that overall there is a sufficient level of staffing to cover the course overall. It is important that any decisions on staffing and contact hours are taken in agreement with line managers.

vii) Contact hours are employed to generate KIS data, which is published on the University website to potential applicants. Consequently, it is worth considering how the hours will be perceived by potential applicants making an initial judgement (compared to other institutions) of their expected experience if they came to study your course at the University of Suffolk.

As a summary – there is no set rules, just a requirement that decisions are taken in a careful and thoughtful manner with full approval from line managers.

Pre-requisites: Indicate any modules (by title) that must have been completed successfully for a student to be able to begin this module. For some courses, 'completion of the previous level of study' or 'successful completion of mandatory modules within previous level of study' may used here.

Excluded combinations: Where this module may not be taken in addition to one or more other modules within a student's programme of study (perhaps because of overlap of module content), those module(s) should be named here.

Module Leader: This should be the name of the member of academic staff who is intended to take lead responsibility for delivering the module. For a new course where new staff are intended to be recruited to deliver the module after the validation event, the Module Leader should be recorded as 'to be appointed'. This should be updated to include the name of the new member of staff when the module specification is published to students within the course handbook.

Module Contributor(s): This should include names of other academic staff who will be involved in delivering the module. Again, where new staff are intended to be recruited to deliver the module after the validation event, Module Contributor(s) can be recorded as 'to be appointed'.

Rationale

This section will normally be no more than a couple of paragraphs (but there are exceptions). You should indicate:

- the reasons for the module's existence (perhaps related to industrial, local or environmental factors)
- how it relates to the course as a whole ('forms the vital core of the course', 'encourages students to apply the theory taught in the rest of the course in a practical situation') and possibly to particular ('preparing students for' or 'building upon')
- any particular elements that differentiate this module from others ('it is work-based', 'provides an option for students not wanting to …').

Aims

This section should include a list of the overarching aims of the module, i.e. broad statements which describe the main intentions of the module overall. It may be helpful to think about the following questions, and use your answers to construct aims as appropriate:

- Why is it important for students to take this module?
- Does this module contribute to the overall development of the students as ‘professionals’, ‘practitioners’, ‘researchers’, ‘experts’, … ?
- Is it hoped that students will gain confidence in particular abilities or skill sets through their study?
- Will this module expose students to particular, or a wide variety of, experience that is important for their development?

Learning outcomes

In this section you should list what a successful student will have demonstrated on completion of the module. This will usually include learning outcomes relating to knowledge and understanding, subject specific cognitive skills, subject specific practical skills and key skills. Each learning outcome should be specific and measurable and should be written at the appropriate level for the module.

A clear and concise approach is recommended, with around 3-5 learning outcomes per module. These should be presented as a numbered list following on from the stem ‘On successful completion of this module, a student will have demonstrated the ability to …’. This should be followed by an action verb (e.g. demonstrate, analyse, collect, evaluate, communicate, apply) and an indication of the intellectual understanding or the skill being performed, and the level of complexity. Appendix 1 provides additional guidance on using action verbs within learning outcomes in order to demonstrate progression between levels, drawing on the six levels of the cognitive domain identified as part of Bloom’s taxonomy.

A course team should consider adopting a consistent approach to the style of learning outcome phrasing, considering the depth of detail to be expressed. For example, within technical and science-based courses there is likely to be some specific details or skills to be explicitly listed. However, within some arts-based courses a few core modules may identify ability to carry out subject specific skills, while the other modules will focus on the students’ ability to apply appropriate skills within particular contexts or arenas. In such situations, the team may agree some generic learning outcomes to be adapted for use in non-core modules.

All learning outcomes must be assessed as part of the module and it must be possible to clearly link students' assessed work with the intended learning outcomes. You should also bear in mind the link between module learning outcomes and the overall course and level learning outcomes, to ensure that they are all in alignment.

Indicative content

This section should provide a brief summary of the academic content of the module, building on the learning outcomes and providing a structure to the knowledge and skills to be covered. You should highlight any specific issues or areas that are well recognised in the subject discipline, industry or profession. This will allow students to find the answer to their 'do we cover … in the course' questions.

Remember that this summary will be read by academic peers from other institutions and by students expecting to study on the module. Too little detail will allow doubt to enter the minds of the peers as they look for evidence of competence and completeness of coverage. On the other hand, too much content may be lost on students and could have a negative effect. It may also quickly go out-of-date, especially in disciplines where there is a fast pace of change, and so future proofing is something to consider.

Learning and teaching methods

This section should summarise the learning and teaching methods that will be used within the module, ensuring an inclusive approach that enables all students to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes. This should be consistent with the approaches discussed in the validation documents (discrepancies will stand out), but should also express the strategies that are particular to this module.

Employability skills

In this section you should list the employability skills (as defined within Graduate Headstart for undergraduate courses) that a student should be able to demonstrate upon successful completion of the module (including any formative assessment tasks). A full list of the skills is provided within the template, which you can adapt to reflect module coverage.

Assessment

This section should describe both the formative and summative assessment that students will be expected to complete as part of the module. The description of the assessments should be specific enough to allow the panel to assure themselves that the learning outcomes can be effectively assessed. However, it is wise to avoid being too specific as this might limit your flexibility in implementing the assessments. For example, it would be helpful to state 'an essay based on exploring health and safety issues evident in a provided case study', but 'an essay exploring a case study provided by a local industrial setting, supported by external visitor presentations or visits' might create issues in the future.

The description should be followed with a tabular summary of all components of summative assessment within the module, indicating for each:

- the form of assessment (for example examination, project, report, essay, presentation, group work assignment)

- size (duration of exams, word limit of written submissions, length of presentations, etc), taking into consideration the Assessment and Feedback Framework's expectations in terms of workload (i.e. 3,000 words of academic writing (or equivalent) for the summative assessment of a 20 credit module at undergraduate level and 5,000 words (or equivalent) for the summative assessment of a 20 credit module at postgraduate level)
- weighting (percentage of the total module mark that the component represents)
- learning outcomes assessed (cross-referenced to the list above)
- designation as core or non-core (i.e. whether the component can be compensated in the event of marginal failure – see the relevant Framework and Regulations for more information).

Care should be taken to demonstrate consistency with the course's overall assessment strategy, and to avoid repetitive approaches to assessment across a course.

Please make sure that the information provided in the table matches the overall course assessment summary in the course handbook.

Indicative reading

For existing modules, this section should merely include a link to the Learning Services online module reading list.

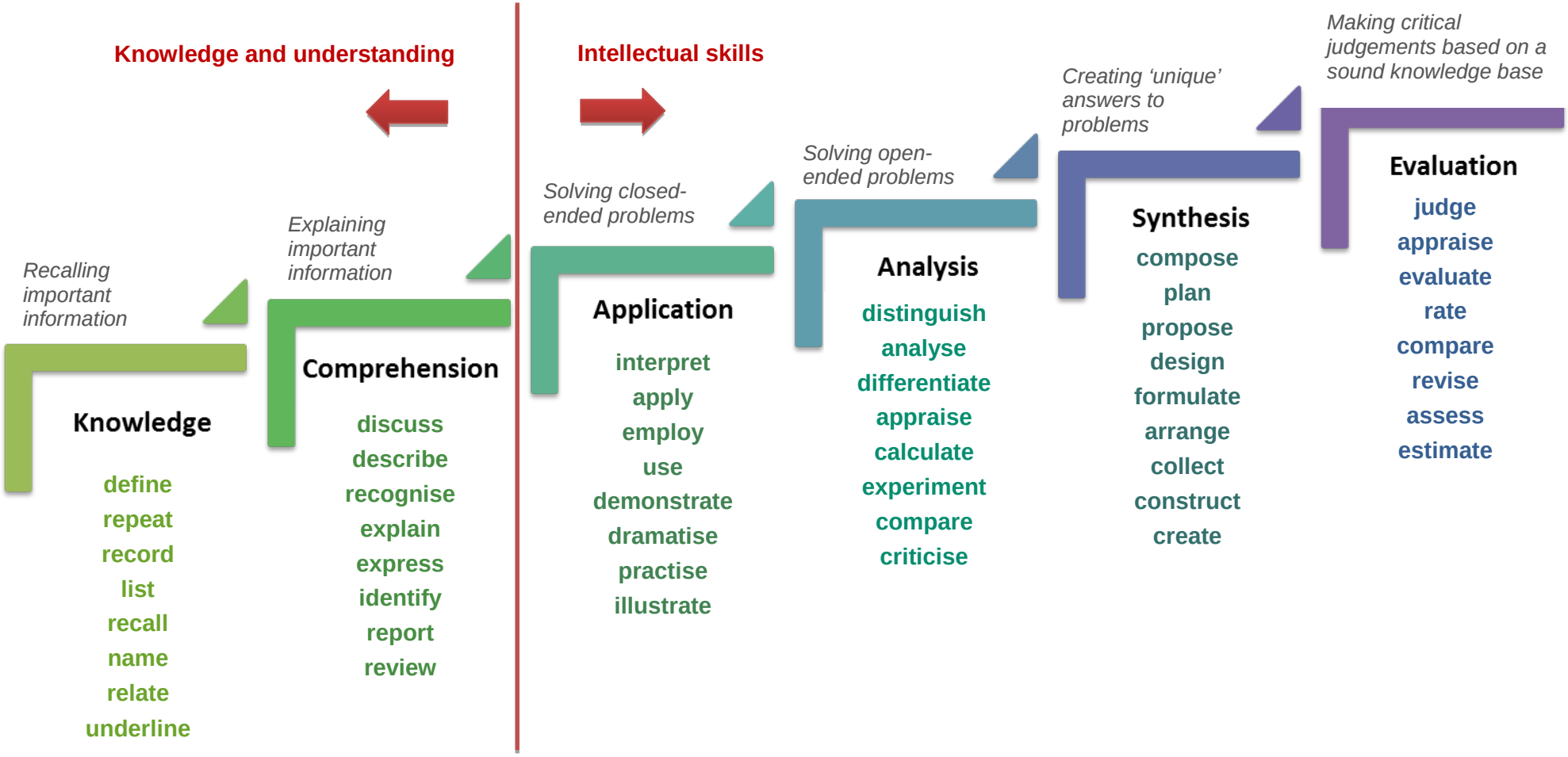
For proposed new modules, you should list the texts that students are required and/or recommended to read when undertaking the module (including books, academic journals, online sources, etc). Reading lists are often divided into three sections:

- Essential reading: what students are required to read
- Recommended reading: what students are strongly recommended to read
- Further reading: material that is relevant to the module.

Advice and guidance on developing and reviewing reading lists is available on Learning Services webpages. You should liaise with your Academic Liaison Librarian to ensure that copies of all the materials listed are available or, for new provision, can be purchased.

Appendix 1

Learning outcomes: Bloom's taxonomy



Learning outcomes: additional action verbs

Knowledge Remember previously learned information	**Comprehension** Demonstrate an understanding of the facts	**Application** Apply knowledge to actual situations	**Analysis** Breakdown objects or ideas into simpler parts and find evidence to support generalisations	**Synthesis** Compile component ideas into a new whole or propose alternative solutions	**Evaluation** Make and defend judgements based on internal evidence or external criteria
Arrange	Classify	Apply	Analyse	Arrange	Appraise
Define	Convert	Change	Appraise	Assemble	Argue
Describe	Defend	Choose	Calculate	Collect	Assess
Duplicate	Describe	Compute	Categorise	Combine	Compare
Identify	Discuss	Demonstrate	Compare	Comply	Conclude
Label	Distinguish	Discover	Criticise	Compose	Contrast
List	Estimate	Employ	Differentiate	Construct	Defend
Match	Explain	Illustrate	Distinguish	Create	Discriminate
Memorise	Express	Interpret	Examine	Design	Evaluate
Name	Extend	Manipulate	Experiment	Develop	Explain
Order	Give example(s)	Modify	Identify	Devise	Judge
Outline	Identify	Practice	Illustrate	Explain	Justify
Relate	Indicate	Predict	Infer	Formulate	Interpret
Recall	Infer	Prepare	Model	Generate	Relate
Repeat	Locate	Produce	Outline	Plan	Predict
Reproduce	Predict	Show	Question	Prepare	Rate
Select	Review	Solve	Select	Revise	Summarise
State	Select	Use	Separate	Set up	Support
	Summarise	Write	Test	Summarise	Value