Writing program/course outcomes for an MA "Higher Education Management" program

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the issue of working out a cycle of writing and improving learning outcomes (LOs) to a program/course. Definition, the need in, the factors determining the quality of LOs, the top-down / bottom-up approach to writing learning outcomes are discussed. The case of writing LOs for an MA at International Black Sea University involved in a TEMPUS project MAHATMA: *Master of Higher Education: Developing leaders for managing educational transformation* is described. A conclusion is made that, to be student centered, writing learning outcomes should be a continuous and sophisticated process of collecting, interpreting and acting on information relating to the goals.

Keywords: learning outcomes, student-centered teaching, curriculum, syllabus, intended audience, shareholders

1. Introduction: What are LOs?

Learning outcomes (LOs) are statements that specify what learners will know or be able to do as a result of a learning activity. They are usually expressed as knowledge, skills, or attitudes. They should flow from a student/potential employers/ society needs assessment.

They are crucial for curriculum and syllabus writing as they help teacher to:

- focus, while planning and teaching, on learner's behavior that is to be changed
- design their materials (content, teaching and assessment methods, activities) more effectively and thoughtfully
- assess the quality of their teaching and to contribute to its improvement
- communicate to students what s/he expects from them
- motivate students to learn (understanding that what they are learning is really useful)
- communicate with their colleagues

They help students to:

- learn more effectively (with the final result in mind) through focusing their attention on the things that will not only help them pass the exam, but also to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in their future professional life
- identify specifically what should be learned
- self-asses

2. Why LOs?

The concept of learning outcomes is deemed to progressively dominate education policy internationally. Learning Outcomes cove the expectations of students, professional bodies and employers. A clear-cut picture of learning outcomes is drawn through a number of reasons:

1. Enables students to be aware of the competences during the study
2. Enables teachers to focus on target competences while being in the process
3. Enables prospective employers to be aware of students' abilities and competences
4. Enables accreditation institutions and politicians to focus on the Higher Education sector in general. The Bologna- process is an excellent example of a political macro-level initiative, which has required that Higher Education sectors develop program,/syllabus centered on learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003).

The pedagogic purposes of LOs are clear, in that they are designed to give a clear indication of the learning destiny, that the learning opportunity provider intends the learner to reach. To the potential learner, the LOs describe what will be learnt, to the potential employer they describe what should have been learnt, to the quality agencies they provide a system for audit and for the funders (if there are still any left) they provide a means to account for how the money was spent. (Scott, 2011). However, we should be careful against overemphasizing LOs. Since the terms used may be unfamiliar and meaningless students, often learning outcomes cannot be specified exactly in advance. When we discuss them with accreditation institutions, (potential) employees, administration, teachers and graduates, it is fine, but students who are only going to study at the program, may have a rather vague idea of the outcomes they need, especially if the students are people who have no experience of working in the corresponding sphere (this is practically always so with BA students and often enough with MA students). Besides, there is criticism that learning outcomes have been abused by managers in educational field as performance indicator. There may be a formalistic (and not content) approach to assessment by accreditation institutions of alignment between the program and Los. There is also a certain doubt about LOs really being student-centered, as they are usually written before the particular group of students begins to learn on a program (Scott, 2011, Doghonadze & Kerdikoshvili, 2012). However, writing the LO as a continuous cycle that model of which we offer below may be a good compromise between rigorous planning and standardization demanded by the Bologna process, on the one hand, and student-centered teaching also demanded by it, on the other.

3. Why start writing a program with LOs?

Program/syllabus writing may be content or outcome driv-

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en. Content-driven curricula and syllabi are not even teacher-centered, they are course-book-centered. On the other hand, it has become traditional by now to design curricula and syllabi in a backward way: first the learning outcomes (Fink calls them learning goals) are decided upon and then the program is built up based around them (Fink, 2003:4; Allen & Tanner, 2007). The process is referred to as backward because it starts with a vision of the desired results. The design process then works backward to develop the instruction. Alignment of course contents, activities, and assessment with learning outcomes is critical to effective course design (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998; Bissell and Lemons, 2006).

Teacher/centered education is more interested in teaching goals/objectives/aims or, in other words, what the teacher wants his/her students to learn as result of delivering his/her course. Biggs (2003) regards the goal of education from the viewpoint of learners constructing their own knowledge, rather than being passive recipients of the knowledge created by others. Biggs has a student-centered view, as he considers that what the learner has to do - to create knowledge - is the important thing. It follows, therefore, that what students are asked to do within the curriculum must align with what those designing the curriculum intend them to learn. Ideally, teaching goals and learning objectives are the same things from different viewpoints:

Teacher's view → what the student has to do ← Student's view

However, teachers are more theoretically (knowledge) oriented, but at the same time more qualified than students, while students are less qualified, but more practically oriented. Thus, probably, well written learning outcomes lie in-between the teacher's and the student's views. When we speak about a potential BA student it is a bit hypocritical to expect that s/he has a clear vision of what s/he will need to be able to do at the end of his/her studies. However, a potential MA student is expected to be more competent, so his/her participation in the process of definition of Learning Outcomes (LOs) should be taken into consideration.

4. Intended audience

Before LOs are named, the program author should answer key questions about who is affected by the need (i.e., who is the intended audience). In our case the intended audience may be various:

- BA program graduates in teaching fields, management or some other areas with no working experience who would like to work in educational management
- School teachers or university lecturers with practical experience who would like to work in educational management

The first group will have some theoretical knowledge of either teaching or management, but will need more knowledge of the other sphere and will certainly need to deal with more practical examples, work out some practical skills, etc. Meanwhile, the second group may lack or even have no theoretical knowledge of educational management, but will have a rich (often negative) practical experience of dealing with educational managers. Thus, all students will need both knowledge and skills in the education and management, as well as to form/change their attitudes towards managerial practices in schools and universities.

If, while we study our potential learners' needs, we apply the terminology they may be unaware of (which, unfortunately, is often the case), the results of such study will be unreliable (Redelius & Hay, 2012). After receiving the answers from potential learners we may "translate" them into a more professional language.

Besides the comprehensible terminology used to describe LOs, it is essential to use clear (vs. vague) verbs, such as the ones recommended in Bloom's taxonomy, e.g.: list, describe, recite, write, compile, create, plan, revise, analyze, design, select, apply, demonstrate, prepare, compute, discuss, explain, predict, assess, compare, rate, critique, etc. (Bloom, 1956).

5. Good LOs

So, finally, good learning outcomes should be observable and measurable, e.g., not "proficient communication in English", but "communication in English on B2 level". Remember that Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2011) describes in detail the requirements towards listening, speaking, reading and writing skills on each level in observable and measurable behavior terms. It is very important that they can realistically be achieved in the given time.

Therefore the bets learning outcomes need to be observable to highlight the discrepancy between poor and excellent achievement within the standard.

Good learning outcomes also should be a logically bound, built on each other, set of components, not just a list of requirements that came to our minds spontaneously.

The frame /format of presenting learning outcomes that is demanded by National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement in Georgia looks logical enough:

Knowledge and comprehension →
(Based on it) ability to use it in practice →
(As result) ability to make conclusions →
(Provided by and further developing) communication skills →
(Provided by and further developing) learning skills →
(Crowing them all, making them all matter) values

This is why, and also due to necessity to accredit the modified program (at the moment we have a functioning program in "education management", not "higher education management") we formulated the LOs in the given format.

6. Initiating a program: top-down/bottom-up

It is obvious that both program and course outcomes should reflect ideas and needs of all interested sides (the so-called shareholders): program author's and lecturers' ideas, on the one hand, and employers', students' , graduates, administration's and educational authorities' views, on the other. Should the process be top-down or bottom-up? Or should it be a mixture of both? What we wanted to do was to work out an efficient algorithm for this process.

Though the program is eventually written by its author, it may be initiated

a) In a top-down way - by the ministry of education, university administration, some project offering the funding, etc.
b) In a bottom-up way – on students'/employers', program author's demand

In a society which is market-oriented, the bottom-up initiative is ideal, but eventually it is not crucial who makes the decision to work out a new program and finds that opening a certain program at his/her university is reasonable:

- Anyway, the market demands need to be studied (the study might not be formal, especially for an experienced person with many contacts in the sphere of education and graduate employment)
- There will be a democratic process: an academic board decision to submit the program for accreditation or not?

7. Algorithm for writing and improvement of LOs: repeated top-down/bottom-up

According to Wheeler (n.d.), the stages for writing LOs are:

Step 1

Faculty/Staff Meeting or form a committee and begin brainstorming about what an ideal student/graduate should know, understand, or have the ability to do.

Step 2

Draft a list of outcomes contingent upon several possible revisions depending upon the changes in the course, program, or major.

Step 3

List student learning outcomes on every course syllabus

Step 4

Gather and report feedback from faculty, staff, and students on how well the outcomes have been addressed.

Step 5

Assess student learning (assignments, projects, quizzes, etc.)

Step 6

Meet with faculty and staff at the end of the semester of academic year to discuss data and revise the list of outcomes, teaching strategies, and curriculum.

Step 7

Repeat steps as often as needed.

The steps that we, based on our own experience (at the Faculty of Education at International Black Sea University which opened in 2010 we have 6 programs successfully accredited and running), offer are the following:

1. Based on potential **students' needs** analysis, **program author (PA in the scheme below)** carries out benchmarking (studies the similar existing programs), then defines the expected goals of his/her program, the degree awarded and creates the **first program draft (PD 1)** (list of courses, number of credits for each course, his/her vision of goals of each course and outcomes of the whole program).

2. **Lecturers (L)** who might be involved in the program are selected and informed about the goals/outcomes of the program, they prepare **the first draft of syllabi (SD1)** and as a group come together with program author. They may offer adding new courses, changing some course titles, discuss the learning outcomes of their courses and then, based on them, of the program.

3. LO for the **second curriculum and syllabi drafts (D2)** are summed up, it is checked that all course outcomes are represented (in a generalized form) in curriculum and vice versa all curriculum LOs are represented at least in one syllabus.

Now the program can be assessed by other shareholders – **potential employers (PE)**. It is presented to them, questions answered, time for assessment provided, and finally recommendations for improvement received. Again the program author together with lecturers reviews the draft and prepares the **third draft (D3)**.

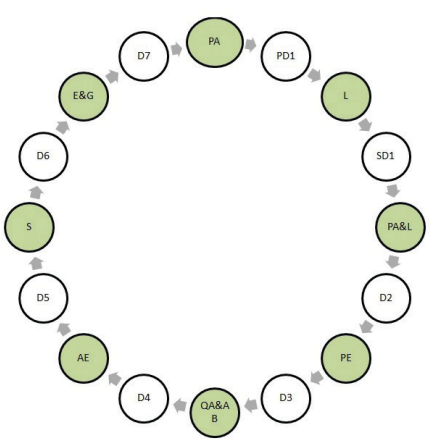
4. Here is where administration comes in. **Quality Assurance (QA)** cooperates with the program author, then the draft is submitted for viewing by the university **Academic Board (AB)**. The fourth, **working draft (D4)** is approved.

5. The next step may be different. As in Georgia there is too little percent of population who can afford to completely cover the tuition fees, the majority of the potential MA students take unified master admission exams and start learning if they not only pass, but also gain grants which cover all or a substantial part of tuition fees. Grants are offered only for accredited programs. This is why in Georgia usually the program is accredited and only then set into action. In the process of **accreditation experts (AE)** may offer some more useful recommendations on the program improvement (the **fifth draft**). However, this is a little paper-based approach.

6. Then **piloting** occurs. Potential students' needs were, of course, vague enough. They clarify it step by step in the process of learning. Thus, **master students (S)**, by the time they complete lecture courses and start writing the Master thesis can as minimum assess how much the acquired knowledge and skills help them to write the thesis. So this is the good time to address students once more. They – on a more qualified level now - express their opinion whether the educational process really helped them achieve the LOs formulated in syllabi and the whole program and whether these LOs will be useful for them. One more **(sixth) draft** is prepared. In economically more developed countries step 5 and 6 are usually reverse).

7. When the piloting is over, the **employment** stage begins: the most authentic assessment occurs, carried out, on the one hand, by **employers** (whether specialists they employ possess the knowledge skills and attitudes the employers need) and **graduates** (whether they find employment easily enough and whether they need to improve much in the process of practical work) (**E&G**). These opinions are really qualified. The curriculum and the syllabi have undergone the whole cycle. However, minor modifications of the program continuously go on (undergoing the same cycle again and again) to satisfy the changing demands.

Figure 1: The continuous cycle of writing learning outcomes



After we initiated at our faculty a program in Education Management in 2010, we have already undergone the first 5 stages and started the 6th one. In a few months we are going to have the first batch of graduates, so we will be able to receive the 6th draft. Anyway, now that our students have finished all the educational courses, means we can involve them in the qualified assessment process (like graduates).

But as our initial program was, in fact, in Secondary Education Management (but included some general items as well), in connection with our TEMPUS project MAHATMA - Master of Higher Education: Developing leaders for managing educational transformation which started in 2012/2013 academic year, we had to skip the last stage and to begin a new cycle. In the new cycle we, of course, did it quicker and easier, benefitting from the old version of the program. On the other hand, we co-operated with the whole project team (universities and educational officials from Armenia and Georgia, the UK, Germany and Czech Republic, educational and business organizations in France and Italy) in writing LOs.

To have the learning outcomes assessed by (potential) students and by (potential) employers we developed the questionnaire.

7. Method

To have the learning outcomes prepared by our lecturers and program coordinator assessed by students and potential employees we developed the following questionnaire The questionnaire was distributed among nine MA students of Educational Management at International Black Sea University and Telavi State University who have finished with their lectures and are at the thesis stage (so are conscious enough about the terminology and program contents). Two employers (Telavi State University and Sokhumi State University) participated in the process.

Question 1: Rate from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum) the importance of these learning outcomes for becoming a manager of higher education: (a list of 45 outcomes offered by us)

Outcomes to be achieved in correspondence to the following competencies:	Students	Employers
I. **Knowledge and understanding of:** **a)** Terminology in education sciences and research, educational assessment, curriculum development, educational leadership and management, psychology, sociology, educational law, budgeting and financing, culture and academic achievement, etc. in the European Higher Education Area;	4.8	5.0
b) Theories in education sciences, psychology, leadership, law, administration, education leadership, assessment, educational research ,budgetary systems, etc. in the European Higher Education Area;	4.8	5.0
c) History, system of education (national and international) and educational reform;	4.5	4.8
d) Teaching and assessment methods;	4.5	3.8
e) Impact of culture on education management;	4.3	4.0
f) Principles and practices that support good leadership and management in the European Higher Education Area;	4.6	4.7
g) The roles and responsibilities of universities within their societies, as seen from various perspectives;	4.3	4.9
h) The seminal literature on student-centered approaches to the provision and enhancement of higher education;	4.0	4.5
i) Guiding principles and good practices in quality assurance, policy development, change management, and governance that can be applied to enhance quality in higher education.	4.2	4.7
j) The key challenges that universities face in supporting the development of their students and staff, and addressing the needs of their local/national communities and stakeholders;	2.9	3.0
k) How knowledge of ways that students learn and experience higher education (within and outside the curriculum) can be used to improve teaching and professional practices;	2.8	2.5
l) The ways that management processes can be used to set standards, and applied to support the attainment of the strategic objectives of university departments and services.	4.8	5.0
Ability to use knowledge in practice **a)** Ability to use professional terminology in the process of work	4.7	5.0
b) Ability to solve real and imaginary professional problems based on the acquired theoretical knowledge	4.8	4.9

c) Ability to illustrate the material with practical examples and theoretical issues	4.8	4.7
d) Ability to read professional literature with deep comprehension	2.9	4.0
e) Ability to contribute to the development of a professional Community of Practice, through the sharing of ideas, outputs and activities	4.6	3.0
f) Ability to reflect critically upon aspects of their own professional practice, and identify opportunities for self-improvement;	4.5	4.7
g) Ability to address opportunities to improve higher education, based upon sound knowledge of management principles and the application of good leadership, communication and teamwork skills;	2.7	4.1
h) Ability to critically evaluate evidence to support conclusions /recommendations, reviewing its reliability, validity and significance.	2.9	4.1
Ability to make conclusions a) Argumentation of one's own opinion, applying induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, comparison and analogy	4.8	4.8
b) Making conclusions dealing with higher education management and demonstrating self-direction and originality in it	2.9	4.4
c) Identifying and defining complex problems and application of appropriate knowledge and skills to their solutions	4.1	4.4
d) Demonstrating critical reading and analytical skills, including understanding an argument's major assertions and assumptions and evaluation via its supporting evidence	4.0	4.0
Communication Skills a) Communicating effectively in a format appropriate to higher education standards and reporting practical procedures in a clear and concise manner	5.0	5.0
b) Interacting effectively within a professional group, recognizing, supporting or being proactive in leadership, negotiating in a professional context, and managing conflict	4.9	5.0
c) Developing non-verbal communication (adequate gestures, body language and eye contact; ability to use visual aids for communication)	4.7	4.9
d) Developing presentation skills, including the application of technologies	2.7	4.0
e) Developing/maintaining General English and professional verbal communicative competence, which, according to EU demands, corresponds to B2 level	4.7	3.5
Learning Skills **a)** Ability to collect, analyze and present data in an ethical and effective manner	4.0	4.5
b) Ability to use the key tools and methods of (qualitative and quantitative) data collection, interpretation and presentation;	3.9	4.0
c) Ability to write, communicate and present reports and other documents in clear and scholarly styles;	4.6	4.8
d) Ability to use digital technology to support and enhance the effectiveness of professional activities	5.0	5.0
e) Ability to design, undertake and present (through dissertation or project work) a substantial piece of original research on a contemporary challenge in higher education;	2.6	3.0
f) Ability to find information on the Internet and in libraries	4.0	4.8
g) Ability for self- and mutual assessment	4.7	4.8
h) Ability to do independent research in Higher Education Area	4.8	4.7
i) Terminology memorization strategy	4.0	3.7
Values **j)** The sense of autonomy	4.9	5.0
k) Awareness of ethical issues in higher education and their adjustment to personal beliefs and values.	4.9	5.0
l) Humanistic and democratic principles of education (student-centered teaching); interest towards research in education sciences	4.8	5.0

m) Academic honesty	5.0	5.0
n) Seeking new knowledge, innovations in Higher Education Area	5.0	4.8
o) Respect for the knowledge and experience of everyone involved in the Higher Education Management	2.5	4.0
p) Tolerance, sensitivity and wish to understand the target and other cultures	4.8	4.0

Based on the results, the less rated outcomes were detected:

1. The key challenges that universities face in supporting the development of their students and staff, and addressing the needs of their local/national communities and stakeholders;
2. How knowledge of ways that students learn and experience higher education (within and outside the curriculum) can be used to improve teaching and professional practices;
3. Ability to design, undertake and present (through dissertation or project work) a substantial piece of original research on a contemporary challenge in higher education;

Question 2: Add, if you wish, some outcomes

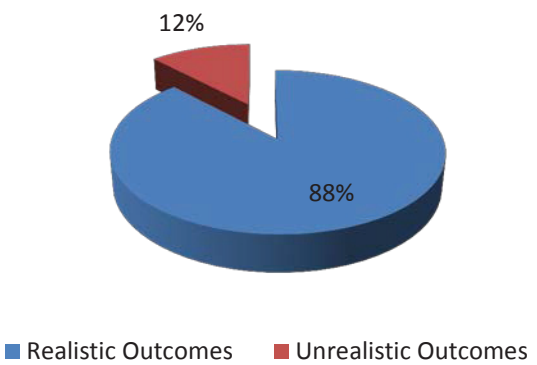
The students skipped this question. The employers added some useful outcomes to the skills for effective communication:

1. Experience sharing
2. Skills for objective evaluation of colleagues' professionalism
3. Objective Analysis of the situation

Question 3: Do you think that the suggested outcomes are reachable (have been reached) in the process of this program?

As summing up the collected results, we have received the following data to analyze. 87% of the outcomes were deemed as realistic and 13% of them were noted as unattainable. Two students skipped the question

Figure 1. Assessment of the offered outcomes

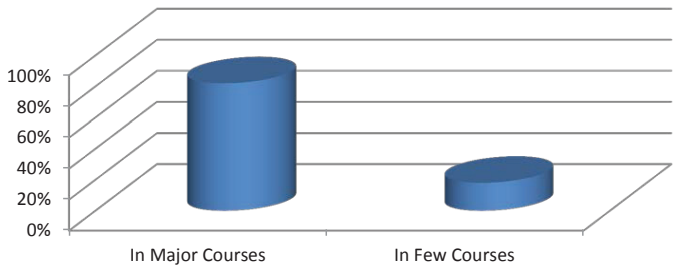


Question 4: Which of the outcomes are formed in all/majority of courses (Write M)

Question 5: Which of the outcomes are formed in a few courses? (Write F) (these two questions were not asked to the employers)

In order to get a clear and comprehensive picture, we have combined both questions together in the following figure. 82% of the outcomes appeared to be formed in majority of the courses and 18% of them in few courses.

Figure 2: Scale of outcomes in the courses



8. Questionnaire results

Analysis of the results revealed three outcomes graded by the students on average below three. The following outcomes were omitted. 1. The key challenges that universities face in supporting the development of their students and staff, and addressing the needs of their local/national communities and stakeholders; 2. How knowledge of ways that students learn and experience higher education (within and outside the curriculum) can be used to improve teaching and professional practices; 3. Ability to design, undertake and present (through dissertation or project work) a substantial piece of original research on a contemporary challenge in higher education. We also added three outcomes recommended by the potential employers and finally received a list of 45. However, after the project meeting at CIEP (Sevres, France), we realized that, to be working, LOs should be less detailed. So we joined some of them, to make them more general and eventually received a list of 26 (see attachment).

9. Conclusions

- To be student centered, writing learning outcomes should be a continuous and sophisticated process of collecting, interpreting and acting on information relating to the goals.
- The quantitative information gathered through the held survey provided evidence for the strong participation of students in designing the learning process. It moves the students to the center of the picture which is a great shift of focus from teaching (teacher-centered) to learning (student-centered) which has been so popular in recent years.
- The role of potential employers is also crucial, as they are our social partners and an active cooperation with them would facilitate the students' involvement in the labor market. Of course, all the potential employers cannot be the experts of education and pedagogy, but could have a better comprehension of what to expect from graduates whose qualifications are expressed in learning outcomes.

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Appendix 1.

Outcomes to be achieved in correspondence to the following competencies:		
	Professional	**General**
Deep Knowledge and understanding of: (the student can define, describe, identify, label, list, match, name, outline, recall, recognize, reproduce, select and state, distinguish, explain, interpret, and paraphrase, etc.)	m) Terminology and theories in education sciences, education management and related sciences and areas; n) History, culture of education management, system of education and educational reform; the roles and responsibilities of universities within their societies, as seen from various perspectives; o) The seminal literature on student-centered approaches to the provision and enhancement of higher education; p) Principles and practices that support good leadership and management, quality assurance, policy development, change management, and governance that can be applied to enhance quality in European higher education. q) The ways that management processes can be used to set standards, and applied to support the attainment of the strategic objectives of university departments and services.	a) How knowledge of ways that students learn and experience higher education can be used to improve teaching and professional practices; b) The key challenges that universities face in supporting the development of their students and staff, and addressing the needs of their local/national communities and stakeholders;

Ability to use knowledge in practice (the student can apply, change, discover, manipulate, modify, operate, predict, prepare, produce, relate, show, solve and use, etc.).	i) Ability to use professional terminology in the process of work, to read professional literature with deep comprehension j) Ability to contribute to the development of a professional Community of Practice, through the sharing of ideas, outputs and activities. k) Ability to reflect critically upon aspects of their own professional practice, and identify opportunities for self-improvement; l) Ability to address opportunities to improve higher education, based upon sound knowledge of management principles and the application of good leadership, communication and teamwork skills; m) Ability to solve professional problems based on the acquired theoretical knowledge	a) Ability to critically evaluate evidence in order to support conclusions /recommendations, reviewing its reliability, validity and significance.
Ability to make conclusions (the student can analyze, compare, contrast, differentiate, distinguish, exemplify, illustrate, infer, outline, relate, select, separate, categorize, combine, compile, compose, create, design, generate, modify, plan, and summarize, etc.)	e) Making conclusions and decisions dealing with higher education management and demonstrating self-direction and originality in it.	a) Argumentation of one's own opinion, applying induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, comparison and analogy
Communication Skills (the student can express, explain, share, interpret, paraphrase, show, demonstrate, compose, influence, and persuade, etc.)	f) Interacting effectively within a professional group, recognizing, supporting or being proactive in leadership, negotiating in a professional context, and managing conflict	a) Communicating effectively in a format appropriate to MA level standards and reporting practical procedures in a clear and concise manner, developing verbal (English on B2 level) and non-verbal communication (adequate gestures, body language and eye contact; ability to use visual aids for communication, including the application of technologies)

Learning Skills (the student can find, organize, fulfill, assess and self-assess, research, keep, present, cooperate, etc.)	q) Ability to use the key tools and methods of qualitative and quantitative data collection, interpretation and presentation; to design, undertake and present (through dissertation or project work) a substantial piece of original research on a contemporary challenge in higher education management;	a) Ability to write, communicate and present reports and other documents in clear and scholarly styles; b) Ability to use digital technology (to find information on the Internet and in libraries, to prepare and hold presentations) to support and enhance the effectiveness of professional activities c) Ability for self- and mutual assessment
Values (the student behaves according to and can appraise, criticize, defend, and support, etc.).	a) Awareness of ethical issues in higher education and their adjustment to personal beliefs and values; tolerance, sensitivity and wish to understand the target and other cultures b) Humanistic and democratic principles of education (student-centered teaching) and management; c) Seeking and respect for new knowledge, innovations in Higher Education Area	a) The sense of autonomy b) Academic honesty