

Draft Threshold Learning Outcomes for Sociology

Consultation Paper

November 2011

The Australian Sociological Association

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Preface

This Consultation Paper presents draft Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for the discipline of Sociology in Australia. They were developed in consultation with sociologists representing a variety of perspectives and located in a variety of institutional contexts and are based on guidelines developed by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). We are seeking feedback on them from all stakeholders. Please forward any feedback that you may have to The Australian Sociological Association (see section 5). Feedback will be incorporated into the final TLOs, which will be submitted to the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) for quality assurance purposes.

1. Introduction

The regulation of tertiary education in Australia is changing. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) will be implementing a new approach to tertiary regulation which includes using threshold learning outcomes for disciplines as part of their remit to conduct quality assurance activities. As the peak body for the Sociology discipline in Australia, The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) has undertaken to develop threshold learning outcomes (TLOs) for Sociology undergraduate programs. This consultation document discusses why the TLOs were developed, outlines the process TASA undertook to develop them, and lists the proposed (draft) TLOs.

2. Developing the Sociology TLOs

The ALTC undertook a pilot Academic Standards project in 2009-2010 to begin the process of developing TLOs for several fields.¹ This pilot project identified peak discipline groups as being responsible for setting academic standards, including developing learning outcomes and consulting broadly to discuss how students may achieve TLOs through their courses of study. The ALTC project defined learning outcomes as discipline-specific knowledge, skills and capabilities. It also developed a process for peak discipline bodies to follow to develop TLOs for their fields.

The ALTC argued that threshold learning outcomes are needed to ensure that Australia maintains high-quality tertiary education programs. An increase in overseas students, education providers, and modes of education provision means that attention must be paid to the substantive content of Australian degrees. The ALTC further asserted that it is the responsibility of the disciplines to develop their own standards with input from their members.

One of the key elements of developing TLOs is the need to refer to relevant international standards. In the case of Sociology, the British Sociological Association developed benchmark standards which were published in 2007.² These were used as key reference points in the development of the Australian Sociology TLOs. Threshold learning outcomes developed by Geography, History, and other disciplines developed through the ALTC pilot project were also consulted.

The TASA Executive, along with the leaders and members of its Teaching Sociology thematic group, started the process of developing the Sociology TLOs in 2010 by forming a National Academic Standards Working Group. Members included Debra King, Helen Marshall, Donella Caspersz, Kirsten Harley, Katie Hughes, Jo Lindsay and David McCallum, The working group reviewed the British Sociological Association Benchmark Statement¹ and held a plenary at the December 2010 TASA

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statement-Sociology.aspx>

conference at Macquarie University. In mid-2011, a Chair was identified to drive the TLO development process. Following the ALTC guidelines, the Chair and TASA representatives established a Discipline Reference Group (DRG) to develop the TLOs (see Table 1). The DRG terms of reference are included at the Appendix.² The Discipline Reference Group met in August 2011 and October 2011 and developed draft TLOs for Sociology. Further discussion was conducted by email. Reports of the process have been included in *Nexus*.

Table 1: Sociology Discipline Reference Group

Chair	A/Prof Karen Farquharson, Swinburne University of Technology
President or nominee, peak discipline group	Dr Deb King, Flinders University (President of TASA)
DASSH (The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) representative	Prof John Germov, The University of Newcastle
Discipline expert	Dr Kirsten Harley, The University of Sydney (co-convenor, TASA Teaching Sociology Thematic Group)
Discipline expert	Dr Kristin Natalier, University of Tasmania (co-convenor, TASA Teaching Sociology Thematic Group)
Discipline expert	Dr Donella Caspersz, University of Western Australia
Discipline expert	Prof Stewart Lockie, The Australian National University
Discipline expert	Dr Helen Marshall, RMIT University
Discipline expert outside of Australia	Prof Robert Mears, Professor of Sociology, Head of School of Science, Society & Management, Bath Spa University, UK
Employer representative	Dr Bev O'Brien, Deputy Director, Northern Connections, Adelaide
Recent graduate	Dr Dan Woodman, The University of Melbourne

3. Scope

The TLOs for Sociology cover all Australian programs that lead to a bachelor degree with a major in the discipline of Sociology. Bachelor degrees are defined as Level 7 in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Other types of qualifications, such as Honours degrees or Masters degrees, are outside the scope of these TLOs.

² See also: <http://www.altc.edu.au/standards/overview>

Sociology is taught in a number of degree programs. These TLOs, however, only apply to programs that include a major in Sociology that is recognised by a higher education provider. The TLOs are expected to be achieved across complete majors, not individual units, so individual units may fulfil some but not all TLOs. It is hoped that those who develop and teach sociology units in other contexts, including those taught outside Sociology programs (e.g., in health, business, or other degrees), will find the TLOs helpful in their content development.

The TLOs for Sociology will constitute the minimum (threshold) outcomes a graduate of a Sociology major or degree would be expected to achieve by the completion of their bachelor degree. Individual higher education providers may set standards for their graduates that are above the threshold learning standards. Many individual graduates will also exceed the TLOs. It is anticipated that the TLOs will be assessable by TEQSA. This may mean that TEQSA audits individual programs against the TLOs.

These TLOs do not constitute a national curriculum and do not prescribe the ways they shall be achieved. Sociology teachers will continue to develop programs and units with a range of content and will maintain flexibility in terms of the topics they offer for sociological study and their broad approach to the discipline. The TLOs do not prescribe methods of teaching or of assessment. Sociology programs will be expected to meet the TLOs, but the ways they achieve them will vary.

Higher education providers may reference these TLOs for degrees with other titles. It is the responsibility of individual providers to identify the appropriate TLOs for their teaching areas.

TASA will maintain responsibility for defining and updating the Sociology TLOs, including identifying and implementing a process for discussing and updating them on a regular basis.

4. Threshold Learning Outcomes for Sociology

The academic discipline of Sociology

Sociology is the study of human societies, focusing on the organisation of social life from individuals to social institutions. It examines people and other actors in their social contexts, and provides insights into the ways factors such as class, wealth, race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability, and religion shape societies at the individual, group, and institutional levels. Central to the sociological endeavour is a critical perspective: sociologists question the popular explanations of social life, through the application of rigorous and systematic methods of enquiry, and examine the dynamics of power and inequality.

Sociology graduates are expected to exhibit an understanding of sociology as an academic discipline. Sociology includes a great diversity of areas of specialisation,

objects of study, research methods and theoretical approaches. Sociological knowledge is often contested, provisional, and situated.

As a discipline, Sociology is characterised by empirically based social research and by carefully examined social theory. Sociology students develop skills in critical thinking, self-direction, collaboration and communication. Graduates of sociology programs are well equipped to go into a variety of careers across a range of government and non-government sectors, particularly those that require high level research and critical thinking skills.

Table 2 contains the draft TLOs developed by the reference group for discussion by and feedback from TASA members and other stakeholders. The TLOs are arranged into three domains:

1. 'Knowledge and understanding': This domain broadly refers to the 'intellectual' achievements specific to the discipline of Sociology.
2. 'Skills': This domain refers to practical capabilities rather than narrow 'competencies'. While Sociology may not be the only discipline that teaches these skills, we can reasonably argue that a major in Sociology will equip students with them.
3. 'Engagement': This domain encompasses generic graduate attributes, but also focusses on what might reasonably be expected as the outcome of a major in the discipline.

The Sociology TLOs

Sociology is a diverse field with a range of theories, methods, and substantive areas of enquiry. Sociological knowledge is both contested and situated in particular contexts. Thus, students can study a variety of topics from a sociological perspective and still meet the threshold learning outcomes. The threshold learning outcomes document is a living document that is expected to change over time.

Table 2: Draft Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for Sociology

Domain	Threshold Learning Outcome
Knowledge and understanding	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Demonstrate a sociological understanding of the nature of social relationships and institutions; the patterns of social diversity and inequality; and the processes that underpin social change and stability.2. Demonstrate an understanding of sociology as an academic discipline, including awareness of its history, principal concepts, and theories.3. Demonstrate an understanding of the sociological research process including design, methodology and methods, and ethics, and the diversity of approaches to research.
Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Demonstrate an ability to summarise, interpret and synthesise the findings of sociological research including empirical research using quantitative and qualitative data.5. Demonstrate an ability to develop arguments by using evidence, evaluating competing explanations, and drawing conclusions6. Demonstrate an ability to address sociological questions by ethical means, applying evidence-based knowledge and appropriate research techniques
Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none">7. Demonstrate an ability to communicate sociological ideas, principles and knowledge to specialist and non-specialist audiences using appropriate formats

5. Feedback

Feedback on the proposed TLOs is requested from all stakeholders. Please send your feedback to TASA by 31 May, 2012. Revisions to the TLOs will be made by the Discipline Reference Group in response to the feedback received. The final documents will be forwarded to the TASA AGM for endorsement and will be made available to TEQSA for its quality assurance activities by December 2012.

Feedback should be sent via email or post to:

Post:

The Australian Sociological Association
The Swinburne Institute for Social Research
P.O. Box 218
Hawthorn
VIC 3122
Australia

Email:

admin@tasa.org.au

Appendix: Discipline Reference Group Structure and Membership³

- Chair
- President of the discipline's principal national body (or their nominee).
- One member drawn from the relevant Council of Deans.
- Three discipline experts (covering various parts of higher education sector such as Innovative Research Universities and Group of Eight. Discipline experts should also have some demonstrated interest in learning and teaching).
- One discipline expert with substantial experience in learning-and-teaching standards setting in a jurisdiction other than Australia (e.g. UK QAA).
- Where applicable a nominee of the relevant professional accreditation body
- At least one relevant employer representative.
- One recent graduate/postgraduate from the discipline working outside the tertiary sector.
- If possible, the committee should include at least one Fellow of an appropriate Australian learned academy (e.g. Australian Academy of the Humanities, Australian Academy of Science, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia). To the extent that it is practicable, there should be some geographical spread of Reference Group membership across the country.

³ ALTC (2010) 'Recommended Process for Disciplines Establishing Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs)', available from: <http://www.altc.edu.au/standards/partner>.