

SOCIOLOGY

Threshold Learning Outcomes

November 2012
The Australian Sociological Association

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discipline peak bodies have been charged with developing threshold learning outcomes (TLOs) for their discipline groups. The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) has developed TLOs for the Sociology discipline in Australia. These TLOs are the minimum outcomes that graduates of Bachelor degrees with majors in Sociology are expected to have achieved at the completion of their course of study. Associate Professor Karen Farquharson was appointed by TASA to lead the development of the TLOs with the assistance of a Discipline Reference Group and in consultation with sociologists throughout Australia.

The Discipline Reference group drafted the TLOs in 2011 before they were circulated by TASA for feedback. The draft TLOs were presented at the 2011 TASA annual conference held at the University of Newcastle in November, 2011 and placed on the TASA website with a request for comments. All known Australian sociology programs were also contacted, provided with the draft TLOs, and asked for their comments and feedback. The consultation process took place between November 2011 and May 2012. All feedback received was considered by the Discipline Reference Group and shaped the final TLOs. The revised TLO document was completed in October 2012.

In addition to describing how the TLOs were developed, this document provides a description of sociology as an academic discipline and identifies the seven threshold learning outcomes for Australian Sociology programs across the domains of Knowledge, Skills and Engagement. The TLOs were developed in consultation with Australian and international discipline experts, and with reference to key national and international benchmarks including the Australian Qualifications Framework (2011) and the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency's benchmarks for Sociology (2007). A comparison of the TLOs and these other benchmarks is also provided.

The Sociology TLOs reside with TASA and will be reviewed regularly. Anyone wishing to request changes can do so via TASA.¹ This TLO document is meant to be a living document that changes over time.

A/Prof Farquharson and the Discipline Reference Group wish to extend their thanks to the community of sociologists and other interested parties who provided helpful suggestions and feedback on the TLOs.

¹ Requests for changes should be sent to TASA:

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1. Learning And Teaching Academic Standards Project and the Threshold Learning Outcomes

1.1 Why Threshold Learning Outcomes

The regulation of tertiary education in Australia is changing. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is 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. Threshold learning outcomes (TLOs) are the minimum outcomes university graduates are expected to achieve in the areas of discipline-specific knowledge, skills and professional capabilities over their course of study. As the peak body for the Sociology discipline in Australia, The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) has undertaken to develop TLOs for Sociology undergraduate programs. It is anticipated that the TLOs will be assessable by TEQSA.

Australian university degrees are regulated by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which specifies the general attributes graduates at each level of qualification must have attained. The AQF is necessarily general, not specifying what discipline-specific knowledge graduates must learn. The TLOs articulate with the AQF award level descriptors so that the minimum standards set by the AQF are supported by the discipline-specific TLOs.

1.2 Developing the Threshold Learning Outcomes

In developing these TLOs TASA followed guidelines developed by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). 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, which must have clearly articulated minimum standards. The ALTC further asserted that it is the responsibility of disciplines to develop their own standards with input from their members.

The ALTC undertook a pilot Academic Standards project in 2009-2010 to begin the process of developing TLOs for several fields.² This pilot project tasked peak discipline groups, such as TASA, with the responsibility 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, noting that disciplines are responsible for and own their TLOs (see Appendix 2 for the terms of reference and suggested process).

One of the key elements in developing TLOs was the need to refer to relevant international standards. In the case of Sociology, the Australian Qualifications Framework award level descriptors and the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency's 2007 Sociology benchmarks³ were used as key reference points in the development of the Australian Sociology TLOs. Threshold learning outcomes

² http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/altc_standards.finalreport.pdf

³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statement-Sociology.aspx>

developed by Geography, History, and other disciplines 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 held a plenary at the December 2010 TASA conference at Macquarie University. In mid-2011, a Chair, Associate Professor Karen Farquharson, 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 Appendix 2.⁴ The DRG met in July 2011, August 2011, October 2011 and August 2012 and developed draft TLOs for Sociology.

Table 1: Sociology Discipline Reference Group

Chair	A/Prof Karen Farquharson, Swinburne University of Technology
President or nominee, peak discipline group	A/Prof 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

⁴ See also: <http://www.altc.edu.au/standards/overview>

The draft TLOs were presented and discussed at the 2011 TASA conference at Newcastle University. Each Australian sociology department was also contacted and asked to offer feedback on the draft TLOs. The TLOs were prominently placed on the TASA website, with a feedback form. They were also included in the TASA newsletter *Nexus* with a request for feedback. The feedback period was from November 2011 through May 2012.

Formal submissions of feedback were received from the Applied Sociology Thematic Group of TASA and from staff at universities around Australia. TASA members provided verbal and written feedback at the 2011 conference. (A list of universities whose staff provided feedback is included in Appendix 3.)

At the end of the feedback period the Discipline Reference Group met to consider the feedback and revise the TLOs.

2. 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.

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 contribute to 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.

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. This threshold learning outcomes document is a living document that is expected to change over time.

3. Nature and Extent of Sociology

Sociology is the study of human societies, focusing on the organisation of social life from individuals to social institutions. It examines individuals and groups in their personal, local, national, global and other 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.

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, reflexivity 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.

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 contested, provisional, and situated in particular contexts.

As one of the social sciences, sociology has traditionally had a strong theoretical and methodological connection with disciplines such as anthropology, political science, history, human geography, gender studies, legal studies, social work, social psychology, organisation studies, demography, public policy and social policy studies. Sociology also contributes to wider intellectual debates about society, social organisation and the patterns underlying different social worlds.

4. Sociology Threshold Learning Outcomes

Table 2 contains the Sociology TLOs. 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. These TLOs meet the AQF Level 7 requirements for depth of knowledge in a particular discipline.
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. These TLOs meet the AQF Level 7 requirements for critical thinking, knowledge synthesis, cognitive, technical and communication skills generally and in the field of sociology in particular. They also meet the AQF Level 7 requirement that students demonstrate an ability to apply their knowledge and skills with initiative.
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. This domain also meets the AQF Level 7 requirement for communication skills.

Table 2: 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; patterns of social diversity and inequality; and processes that underpin social change and stability. 2. Demonstrate knowledge of sociology as an academic discipline in its social, historical and world context, including its principal concepts and theories. 3. Demonstrate an understanding of research processes in sociology including design, methodology and methods, ethics, analysis, interpretation, and the diversity of approaches to research.
Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Demonstrate an ability to apply sociological theories, concepts and evidence to sociological questions. 5. Demonstrate an ability to critically review, analyse, summarise and synthesise sociological scholarship including research using quantitative and qualitative data. 6. Demonstrate an ability to develop arguments by using evidence, evaluating competing explanations, and drawing conclusions.
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.

APPENDIX 1:

Australian Sociology Threshold Learning Outcomes in relation to other significant benchmarks

The Australian Sociology Threshold Learning Outcomes were developed in reference to relevant Australian and international standards. In particular, the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) benchmark learning outcomes for Sociology (honours degrees) and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) were considered. In order to be accredited at AQF Level 7 (Bachelor Degree), qualifications must meet a number of specific criteria. The Sociology TLOs were designed to ensure that Sociology pass degrees meet the required standards for AQF Level 7. Table 3 shows how the Australian TLOs compare with both the AQF criteria and the QAA's benchmarks.

Table 3: Australian Sociology Threshold Learning Outcomes in relation to other significant benchmarks

Domain	The Australian Sociological Association Threshold Learning Outcomes	Australian Qualifications Framework Level 7 criteria	British Quality Assurance Agency*
Knowledge and understanding	<p>Demonstrate a sociological understanding of the nature of social relationships and institutions; patterns of social diversity and inequality; and processes that underpin social change and stability.</p> <p>Demonstrate knowledge of sociology as an academic discipline in its social, historical and world context, including its principal concepts and theories.</p> <p>Demonstrate an understanding of research processes in sociology including design, methodology and methods, ethics, analysis, interpretation, and the diversity of approaches to research.</p>	<p>The Bachelor Degree qualifies individuals who apply a broad and coherent body of knowledge in a range of contexts to undertake professional work and as a pathway for further learning</p> <p>Graduates of a Bachelor Degree will have a broad and coherent body of knowledge, with depth in the underlying principles and concepts in one or more disciplines as a basis for independent lifelong learning</p>	<p>On graduating with an honours degree in sociology, students should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describe a range of key concepts and theoretical approaches within sociology • recognise patterns of social diversity and inequality • recognise the nature of social relationships between individuals, groups and social institutions • recognise the processes that underpin social change and social stability • identify diverse research strategies and methods, and illustrate their use in gaining sociological knowledge • recognise sociologically informed explanations • recognise the ethical dimensions of social research

Domain	The Australian Sociological Association Threshold Learning Outcomes	Australian Qualifications Framework Level 7 criteria	British Quality Assurance Agency*
Skills	<p>Demonstrate an ability to apply sociological theories, concepts and evidence to sociological questions.</p> <p>Demonstrate an ability to critically review, analyse, summarise and synthesise sociological scholarship including research using quantitative and qualitative data.</p> <p>Demonstrate an ability to develop arguments by using evidence, evaluating competing explanations, and drawing conclusions</p>	<p>Graduates in a Bachelor Degree will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cognitive skills to critically review, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge • cognitive and technical skills to demonstrate a broad understanding of knowledge with depth in some areas • cognitive and creative skills to exercise critical thinking and judgement in identifying and solving problems with intellectual independence <p>Graduates of a Bachelor Degree will demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with initiative and judgement in planning, problem-solving and decision-making in professional practice and/or scholarship • to adapt knowledge and skills in diverse contexts • with responsibility and accountability for own learning and professional practice and in collaboration with others within broad parameters 	<p>On graduating with an honours degree in sociology, students should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognise the value of comparison for sociology • recognise and illustrate the relationship between a range of sociological arguments and evidence • recognise contrasting interpretations of events • gather and summarise information • cite evidence and make judgements about its merits • contrast points of view and discuss them. • undertake a preliminary investigation of sociologically informed questions • summarise the findings of empirical sociological research including the ability to identify the methodological framework used • apply basic research tools in a preliminary way
Engagement	<p>Demonstrate an ability to communicate sociological ideas, principles and</p>	<p>Graduates in a Bachelor Degree will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication skills to present a 	<p>On graduating with an honours degree in sociology, students should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify and select from appropriate sociological

Domain	The Australian Sociological Association Threshold Learning Outcomes	Australian Qualifications Framework Level 7 criteria	British Quality Assurance Agency*
	knowledge to specialist and non-specialist audiences using appropriate formats.	clear, coherent and independent exposition of knowledge and ideas	sources and present the conclusions in an appropriate sociological format <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify and select sociological work relevant to given social, public and civic policies.

*Source: Australian Qualifications Framework 2011 (p. 37)

**The British Standards are for honours level degrees. Source: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007), 'Sociology', Mansfield, UK, available from:

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

APPENDIX 2:

Discipline Reference Group Terms of Reference and Membership

The ALTC developed guidelines for the development of threshold learning outcomes. These guidelines recommended developing an Expert Advisory Group, a small group of experts in the discipline who would give advice to the project leader. Included in the Expert Advisory Group should be at least one representative from the peak organisation. A Discipline Reference Group should also be convened with the following membership:

- 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.

The recommended process for developing the TLOs was:

1. Draft the TLOs in reference to local and international benchmarks in the domains of 'knowledge, skills and application of skills'.
2. Get feedback from the Expert Advisory Group.
3. Get feedback from the Discipline Reference Group and other stakeholders and revise the TLOs.
4. Circulate the revised TLOs widely for feedback and advice. Revise in light of feedback.
5. Circulate to the peak body for final comments and endorsement.

These processes were broadly followed in the development of the Australian Sociology TLOs.

APPENDIX 3

Feedback

Feedback was received from staff at the following universities:

Australian Catholic University

Australian National University

Flinders University

Griffith University

Macquarie University

Monash University

Murdoch University

Southern Queensland University

Swinburne University

University of Ballarat

University of Melbourne

University of New England

University of New South Wales

University of Newcastle

University of Notre Dame Australia

University of Queensland

University of Sydney

Victoria University Melbourne

We also received feedback from the TASA Applied Sociology Thematic Group. The Discipline Reference Group thanks everyone who provided feedback and suggestions for improvements to the TLOs.