



Guide to Writing MBA Program and Course Learning Outcomes and Assessment that Align with QF*Emirates* Level 9 Descriptors

**Commission for Academic Accreditation
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*This pamphlet is based on a guide produced by Prof Ian Cumbus and Prof. Helen Marshall for the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) ‘Guide to Writing Program and Course Learning Outcomes that Align with QF*Emirates*’ (2012).*

Part 1 – Background

1. Introduction

This pamphlet is intended to provide guidance to higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who are currently, or who are considering, offering a program of study leading to a Master of Business Administration (MBA). The guide focuses on the alignment of program and course learning outcomes (LO's) and assessment to the Qualifications Framework Emirates (*QF Emirates*) Level 9 (Master) Descriptors. This guidance sets out ways of approaching this task but is not a definitive guide. It draws on experience from other countries, particularly the UK, which has already introduced such a framework.

It is important that institutions and their personnel develop and embed a learning outcomes based approach not only in the writing of program documentation also in the development of curricula and within the teaching, learning and assessment activity if *QF Emirates* is to have maximum impact in improving student outcomes.

2. The MBA in the UAE

The MBA is ubiquitous to most business faculties. Since its inception in the USA in the early twentieth century the award has spread across the globe. The MBA is considered as a professional postgraduate degree. It is a generalist qualification that develops middle and senior business managers' strategic knowledge, skills and competencies. The MBA has morphed into a range of formats and structures, including the full-time, part-time and executive MBA programs. In the past thirty years there has been an exponential rise in the number of programs and enrolled students taking the MBA. This growth is due to range of factors. On the supply side growth has been encouraged by factors such as: the MBA is seen by many higher education administrators as a requisite for a business faculty that offers postgraduate programs; many institutions have been able to attract significant numbers of fee paying MBA students, often paying a premium compared to other postgraduate programs. From a demand perspective, reasons for the growth of the MBA includes: massification of higher education; the professionalization of the

management of business; and a perception that a MBA will result in either increased employment and promotion opportunities, and/ or higher salaries.

In the UAE the first MBA was offered in 2001. Today, there are thirty-two active programs with around 6,000 students enrolled. The drivers in the growth in the number of MBA programs being offered and enrolled students in the UAE are similar to those detailed above. However, the growth in the UAE's economy and population and the structure of the UAE's higher education provision has meant that those forces have been fuelled by the proliferation of business faculties, the high percentage of for-profit private sector institutions and a highly competitive, market focused, and instrumental student population working in one of the most dynamic commercial environments.

The CAA in its Initial and Renewal of Accreditation reviews has identified that a large number of MBA programs struggle to develop program learning outcomes (PLOs), course learning outcomes (CLOs) and assessment at the required QF *Emirates* Level 9 (Master level). This is highly problematic as it results in programs that do not deliver what the student, the sector and the UAE requires. This guide is an attempt to address these failings.

Part 2 – Writing Learning Outcomes at Program Level

3. QF*Emirates* and its relationship with program outcomes

The National Qualifications Authority (NQA) has established a national framework of qualifications published in the Qualification Framework Emirates Handbook in 2011 (QF*Emirates*), in order to bring coherence to the award system and relate all education and training awards to each other. It has established clearly defined standards about the quality of qualifications and about what a learner can be expected to achieve for each award. The framework is based on an approach to the meaning of a qualification that recognises learning outcomes – what a person with an award knows, can do and understands – rather than content or time spent on a programme. This, it is intended, moves the focus of learning from the teacher to the student.

QF*Emirates* has a structure of ten levels with each level based on specified standards of knowledge, skills and competence. These standards define the outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking to gain awards at each level. Levels 5 to 10 are relevant to higher education in UAE. Level 9 LOs refer to master level awards. Each of these levels is defined by a set of learning outcomes which are categorised into three strands:

1. Knowledge
2. Skill
3. Competence.

QF*Emirates* further divides competence into three sub-strands

- a) Autonomy and responsibility
- b) Self-development
- c) Role in context.

These make up the framework which MBA program learning outcomes need to address. It is also useful to think of knowledge and skills using some substrands as this helps focus our efforts in aligning program learning outcomes to QF*Emirates*.

The table below sets out a suggested way of looking at the strands to develop program level learning outcomes.

Strand	Sub-strand	Description
Knowledge	Breadth	How broad is the learner's knowledge?
	Type	What characteristics and quality of knowing has the learner engaged in?
Skill	Range	What is the breadth of the physical, intellectual, social and other skills acquired by the learner?
	Selectivity	How does the learner select the skills learned to address a range of problems? What is the nature of the complexity of the problems and how does the learner engage with them?
Competence	Autonomy and responsibility	How does the learner demonstrate the taking of responsibility personally and in groups? How does the learner deploy skills acquired in managing interactions with others and working on their own?
	Self-development	To what extent can the learner operate in new environments, acquire new knowledge and skills; and assimilate these to their existing body of knowledge and skills?
	Role in Context	Can the learner apply/deploy their knowledge and skills in a range of relevant contexts?

When designing or reviewing a program, it should be evident from the PLOs in the program document that a successful graduate would achieve the required QF*Emirates* learning outcomes, therefore, when writing learning outcomes for a program it is advisable to organise them into these strands and where possible into the sub-strands.

There is a requirement that all programs delivered in the UAE will be designed and delivered in a way that ensures that all strands in the QF*Emirates* will be addressed (Specifically see CAA *Standards*: 3.1.3; 3.3.3; and, 3.8.2). The balance of emphasis between the strands will vary between individual programs. For example, some will place a stronger emphasis on knowledge and skills and less on competencies while others will have a greater focus on competencies and a narrower knowledge base, e.g., perhaps the MBA. It will be important to demonstrate how significant each strand is to your program and be able to reflect on

why some strands have much less significance. It is recognised that few programs currently emphasise outcomes related to competencies.

4. Writing program outcomes

Program outcomes set out the outcomes expected across the entire program leading to the award. Thus a program outcome is a statement of what a learner is expected to know, the skills they will have and be able to use to underpin the competencies in the *QFEmirates*.

Writing Guidance:

Start program learning outcomes with the phrase:
“On successful completion of this program the graduate will...”

This phrase can be followed with the PLOs grouped under the strands of *QFEmirates*.

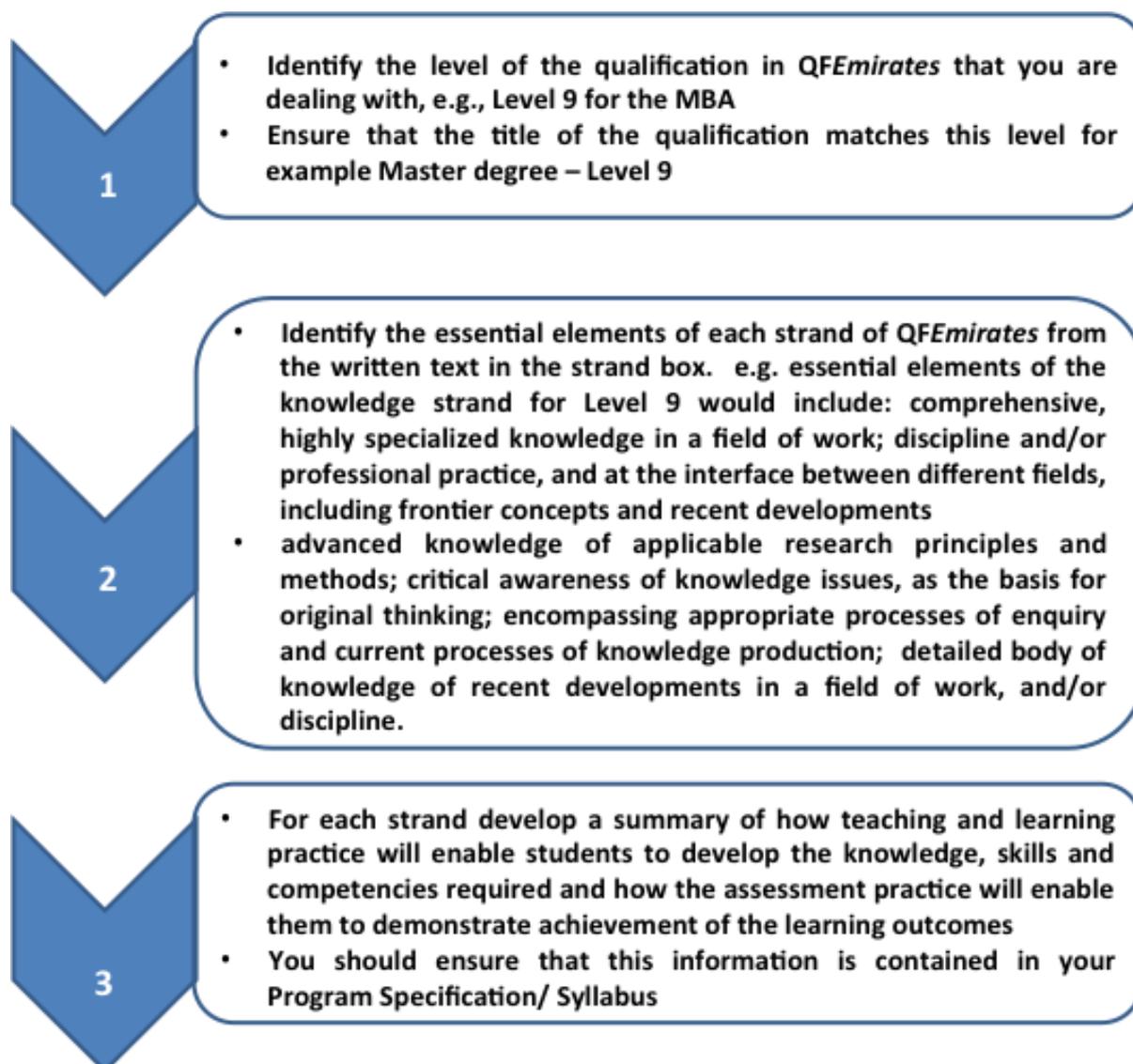
Program outcomes are inherently broad as they recognise the learning outcomes of an entire program. They differ from course learning outcomes in that course learning outcomes are written to clearly indicate how the students will demonstrate their knowledge, skill or competence. PLOs are mainly attained through the achievement of course learning outcomes across the program. Although some PLOs can be achieved through more abstract achievement, e.g., employability. It is at course level that the main assessment of learning outcomes takes place. Program outcomes can be directly assessed by different measures and instruments, such as capstone course assessments, and integrative exit examinations. They can also be indirectly assessed through instruments such as surveys of employers, comparison with peer institutions, surveys of past graduates, retention rates, analyses of curricula. Consequently, program outcomes can and should be broader to effectively capture the breadth and depth of student learning, skills acquisition and competencies developed across the program.

5. Alignment of program outcomes to *QFEmirates*

In order to ensure that the PLOs of existing programs, offered prior to 2012, align to *QFEmirates*, they will need to be reviewed and changes to current learning

outcomes are likely to be required as well as a review of underlying teaching, learning and assessment practice. It is important that not only program documentation is aligned to *QF Emirates* but that the teaching and assessment that students experience enable them to develop and demonstrate the knowledge skills and competencies required for the award of the qualification. Alignment is more than a paper exercise.

Steps to alignment of MBA program learning outcomes with *QF Emirates*



6. Judging the level of learning outcomes

One of the more challenging aspects of writing learning outcomes is ensuring they are pitched at the right level for the qualification being awarded. There are two important factors that we should focus on when writing learning outcomes to ensure they are pitched at and communicate the level expected to be achieved by the students:

- a. The verbs used to describe the learning outcome; and
- b. The scope of the task and quality of the guidance given to the students

It is usually thought that the verb used will reveal to us the levels at which students are expected to perform in order to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcome. In reality it is essential that both of the verb and the scope and guidance elements are addressed to ensure that the level is clear.

a. Verbs used

The verbs are used to describe what the learning outcome requires of the student. This will determine the verb to be used. Further guidance on verbs based on Bloom's Taxonomy is set out in Appendix 1 of this Guide.

b. Scope and guidance

This scope of what a student is expected to know or be able to do relate to the detail, depth and breadth of their expected knowledge, the amount of complexity they are dealing with, the use and evaluation of different theories and approaches and the amount of uncertainty contained in the material they are using.

The quality of the guidance given to students relates to how much support they will be given by academic faculty and how much they will be expected to do on their own.

For example: a first year undergraduate on a bachelor's degree will be dealing with basic concepts and knowledge, working with accepted theories and approaches and quite closely guided in their work by academic faculty.

A doctoral student will be expected to display considerable depth of knowledge, deal with complex material and work with uncertain and incomplete material and data to develop their thesis with more limited guidance from academic faculty.

The following are examples of the two elements – verbs used and scope and guidance being used to differentiate level. You will notice that the verb used does not change as we move through the levels but the scope and guidance element changes considerably.

Level 5 – diploma level

- Analysis - the student will be able to analyse with guidance using given classifications and principles

Level 7 – bachelor degree

- Analysis - the student will be able to analyse new and/or abstract data and situations without guidance, using a range of techniques appropriate to the subject

Level 9 – master degree

- Analysis - the student will be able to analyse new and/or abstract data (including incomplete data) and situations using a range of advanced techniques relevant to the subject and demonstrate self-direction and originality in explaining and interpreting outcomes.

7. Example of program outcomes

An example provided here under the five QF *Emirates* learning outcome strands of MBA PLOs. Note: these should be incorporated into a program design that has a central Program Aim and could have Program Goals.

Knowledge

On successful completion of this Program the graduate will be able to:

- Exhibit critical awareness of a range of relevant principles and theoretical knowledge to develop strategies and solutions to current business problems;

- Compare and contrast alternative models of financial and market information;
- Show critical awareness relevant principles and theories to a national and global business context to develop strategies for the organisation; and
- Demonstrate an advanced and critical awareness of mathematics and statistics and their application to business contexts.

Skill

On successful completion of this Program the graduate will be able to:

- Employ advanced problem solving skills to formulate solutions and identify risks associated with the solutions in order to develop effective and innovative business strategy;
- Select and deploy a range of skills to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields to address strategic issues;
- Demonstrate successful major and complex project management skills based on sound research methodology and methods; and
- Communicate within a highly specialist environment that allows the presentation of critiques of highly complex strategic matters.

Competence

On successful completion of this Program the graduate will be able to:

Autonomy and responsibility

- Demonstrate that they can function autonomously and/ or take responsibility for managing professional practices, in highly complex, unpredictable and unfamiliar, environments; and
- Account for high level governance of processes and systems with a strategic context.

Self-development

- Initiate and manage high-level professional activities in a strategic context;
- Can take responsibility for leading the strategic performance and development of professional teams and self;

Role in context

- Demonstrate professional attributes relevant to their role and in unfamiliar learning contexts;
- Set team strategic objectives and take responsibility for team performance in the highly complex environments.

Part 3 – Writing Learning Outcomes at Course Level

8. Differences between program and course learning outcomes

As we have already seen outcomes at program level are broad. This is in contrast to course learning outcomes. CLOs need to be specific in describing what a student will know and be able to do at the end of the course – in short they need to be capable of being assessed. If CLOs are not capable of being assessed they cannot fulfil one of their core purposes.

Additionally, CLOs establish course content and the range and type of teaching and learning activity that students will experience. CLOs serve the following core purposes:

- Establish course content;
- Influence the range and type of teaching and learning activity on the course;
- Form the basis of assessment activity;
- Inform students what is expected of them; and
- Contribute to the achievement of one or more program outcomes.

Example - Program: MBA; Course: Global Environment

Example of a Program Learning Outcome

“PLO1 On successful completion of this programme the graduate will be able demonstrate highly specialized knowledge of the global environment in which both public and private secor organisations operate.”

Example of a Course Learning Outcome

“CLO2 On successful completion of this course the learner will be able to critically apparisre key concepts and theories in the development of the global environment.”

9. Writing course learning outcomes

Learning outcomes at course level state the knowledge, skills and competencies that the typical learner will be able to demonstrate through the assessment process for that course. The learning outcomes for the course must contribute to the achievement of the knowledge, skill and competencies set for the overall program and each course will do this to a different degree and in a different way.

For example, a course in the first year of a undergraduate program is likely to have a higher knowledge component and less emphasis on skills and competencies but as the student progresses through the program there is increased emphasis on how the student is able to use and apply the knowledge and develop associated skills and competencies. Thus, individual courses serve different purposes and it is the collective learning across all courses that enable the student to achieve the overall program learning outcomes.

Course learning outcomes should contain the following features:

1. Begin with an action verb and describe something (knowledge, skill or competence) that is observable and measurable.

Common problems and tips

Too many verbs in one learning outcome - this will be confusing to staff and students. It will be unclear what students are expected to focus on and the how the assessment will test whether they are able to demonstrate they have achieved the learning outcome. Ensure that you are clear what it really is you want the student to be able to demonstrate and at the same time envisage how you will assess this. Doing this will lead you to the best solution.

2. Focus on what you expect students to be able to demonstrate on completion of the course

Common problems and tips

Do not set too many learning outcomes. It is important to identify the essential things students will know and be able to do at the end of the course. If you have too many learning outcomes this will cause problems with assessment as you will either not be able to assess all of them or you will overload the students with too much assessment. Try to ensure each course has between 4-6 learning outcomes. If you have more than this consider whether they are really too detailed and are really the outcomes at lecture or workshop level or too broad and are really the outcomes at program level.

3. Be capable of being assessed and addressed by the assessment strategy in the course

Common problems and tips

The main reason that learning outcomes are not capable of being assessed is

because they are written too broadly and are pitched more at program level, or written using vague terms. Vague terms would include “*appreciate, understand, be familiar with*”. It is very difficult to assess these outcomes. Instead focus on what the student will actually be able to demonstrate. For example *students will be familiar with* the functions of marketing within an organisation CHANGE TO - *students will be able to explain* the functions of marketing within an organisation.

4. Be capable of being understood by students, faculty and external agencies and stakeholders

Common problems and tips

The language used to write learning outcomes needs to be clear unambiguous and written in a way that communicates what a student will know and be able to do at the end of the course. This will ensure that all internal and external stakeholders are clear on what they can expect of students at the end of a course.

5. Be pitched at the correct level for the award which is aligned with QFEmirates

Common problems and tips

The verbs used to describe the learning outcomes need to be active verbs and relate to what the learning outcome requires the student to demonstrate. In addition to ensure the outcome is pitched at the right level, the scope of what a student is expected to know or be able to do in relation to the detail, depth and breadth of their expected knowledge, the amount of complexity they are dealing with, the use and evaluation of different theories and approaches and the amount of uncertainty contained in the material they are using will need to be clearly set out. The quality of the guidance given to students and how much support they will be given by faculty and how much they will be expected to do on their own will complete the picture and clearly signal the level at which students are achieving learning outcomes

10. How course learning outcomes contribute to the achievement of program outcomes.

A program is made up of a range of courses that collectively will provide students with the teaching and learning opportunities to learn and develop the relevant knowledge, skill and competencies and the assessment opportunities to demonstrate these and show achievement of the overall program outcomes. The task of the program team (this is you and your colleagues who will deliver the courses on the program) is to decide upon the range and mix of courses that will develop the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and competencies to ensure the overall

program outcomes (that are aligned to QF*Emirates*) are achieved. When designing CLOs it is essential that the teaching, learning and assessment activity is planned at the same time to ensure the learning experience enables students to achieve and demonstrate the achievement of the outcomes.

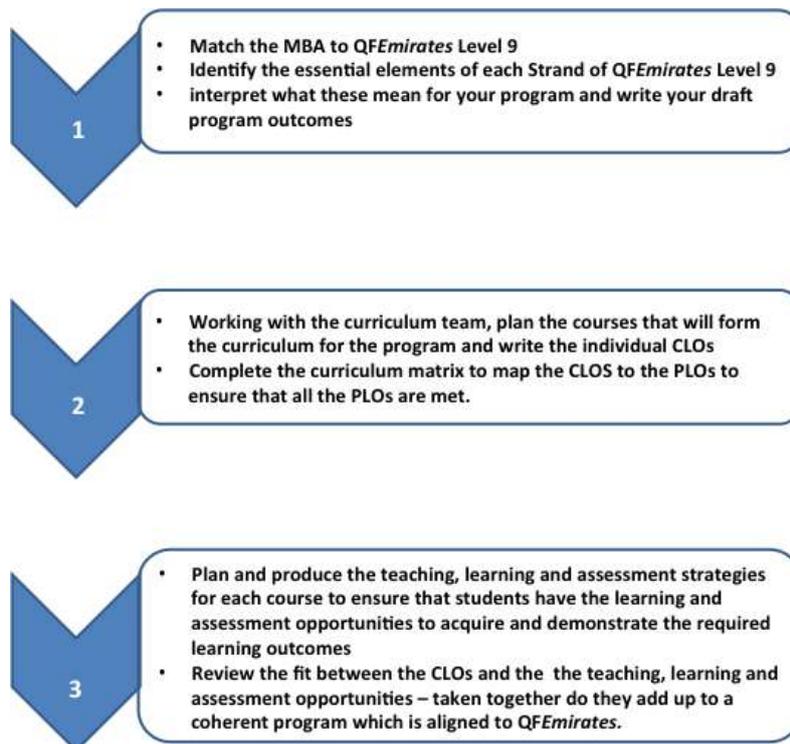
In order to ensure that each of the strands of QF*Emirates* is properly addressed within the program across the range and mix of courses it is helpful to develop a curriculum map or matrix. An example of such a template curriculum map and a sample completed version is set out in Appendix B.

Thus alignment of course learning outcomes to program outcomes is as important as aligning the program outcomes to QF*Emirates*.

Remember that students need to achieve the whole set of program outcomes at the correct level that comprise the qualification descriptor in QF*Emirates*.

The following overall stages should be followed.

Stages in ensuring that course learning outcomes contribute to the achievement of program outcomes



11. PLO/ CLO Writing Exercise

Review the following extract from a set of outcomes that have been written as program level outcomes for a MBA that the program team are presenting as aligned to QF Emirates at level 9.

PLOs: MBA

PLO 4. Goal: Global Perspective

On completion of this Program students will be able to:

- 4.1 Recognize the political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors relevant to businesses;*
- 4.2 Explain a corporate business strategy for an international market.*

Review the following outcomes that have been written as course level learning outcomes for a MBA aligned to the QF Emirates at level 9.

CLOs: Global Environment

On completion of this Course students will be able to:

- 1. Discuss the key political, economic, social, technological factors that might impact a business;*
- 2. Describe alternative models of global economic development.*

Please see **Appendix C** for suggested alternatives.

Appendix A: Sources of Useful Information

Useful information on the writing of learning outcomes.

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (2013) AACSB Assurance of Learning Standards: An Interpretation. [Online] Available at: <http://www.aacsb.edu/~media/AACSB/Publications/white-papers/wp-assurance-of-learning-standards.ashx> [accessed on 10th May, 2015]

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SOAS University of London. (2015) Academic Teaching Development: Learning Outcomes. [Online] Available at: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/qualityassurance/quality-assurance-handbook/a/progspecs/file67584.pdf> [accessed on 10th May, 2015]

Times Higher Education. (2012) The Unhappiness Principle Nov. [Online] Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/the-unhappiness-principle/421958.article> [accessed on 10th May, 2015]

Appendix C: Program-Course *LO Matrix Example*

Program	Code	Course Title	Program Outcomes									
			A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3	C1	C2	C3	Note
MBA	MBAXXX	Research Methods	F		P			F	P			
MBA	MBAXXX	Dissertation		F		F		F			P	
MBA	MBAXXX	Global Environment				F		P			F	
MBA	MBAXXX	Strategic Management	F	P			F		P	P		
MBA	MBAXXX	International Trade			F	F			P	P	P	
MBA	MBAXXX	Commercial Law and Practice		F		P		F				
MBA	MBAXXX	Human Resource Management	F		P		F		F	F		
MBA	MBAXXX	Supply Chain Management		F	P		F				P	
MBA	MBAXXX	Information Technology	P		F			F		F		
MBA	MBAXXX	Global Marketing		F		P		P	F			
MBA	MBAXXX	Organisational Behaviour				P	P		F	F		
MBA	MBAXXX	Accounting for Business Decision Makers	P			F	P			P	F	
MBA	MBAXXX	Strategic Finance	F	F		F		P			P	
MBA	MBAXXX	Fundamentals of Business 2	F		P	P		F		P		
MBA	MBAXXX	Fundamentals of Business 1	F	F		F		F	F		P	

Appendix D: Suggested Alternative Outcomes

PLOs: MBA

4. Goal: Global Perspective

On completion of this Program students will be able to:

4.1 Conduct an in-depth analysis of the political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors relevant to strategic decision-making for a global organization;

4.2 Evaluate and develop recommendations regarding a corporate business strategy for an international market.

Review the following outcomes that have been written as course level learning outcomes for a MBA aligned to the QFEmirates at level 9.

CLOs: Global Environment

On completion of this Course students will be able to:

- 1. Critically appraise the key political, economic, social, technological factors that might impact a business;*
- 2. Critically evaluate alternative models of global economic development*