



Expert guide: Capstone units facilitating the transition from university to employability

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Australian government reports on the future of work reveal that today's graduates face up to seven career changes in their working lifetime, and possibly up to 15 different jobs. So, it is vital graduates develop the skills to adapt to these transitions.

Capstone units and experiences were chosen by the Australian higher education system as the most practical and appropriate mechanism for assisting final-year students to manage the transition process from university to employment.

Capstone curriculum design, however, is often limited to the demonstration of knowledge and skills. Yet, in the ever-changing world of work, graduates also need well-developed personal and professional identities, solid reflective practices and life-long learning skills. This idea supports the view that universities should focus on educating the whole person rather than only acquiring discipline specific knowledge and skills.

How does this relate to employability?

The concept of a capstone unit is gaining currency within the Higher Education systems of many countries. In Australia, a major motivating factor is the Australian Government's focus on enhancing graduate employability and assuring graduate outcomes. As argued in the employABILITY development initiative, such enhancement and assurance requires the cognitive, explicit and degree-wide engagement of learners in their personal and professional development.

Interviews with educators in 18 universities in Australia on the aim of capstone units found near-full agreement that a prime aim of a capstone unit was to improve the employability of the student. Another widely supported view was that a capstone unit should be a final-year unit, and it should enable students to demonstrate the skills they had acquired over a three-year degree course. Common phrases used to describe a capstone unit included 'bringing together of skills' and 'making sure they were job ready'(Cullen, 2017, p.92).

Top tips

- Lee (2015) identifies six types of capstone units used in Australian universities across several disciplines. In Lee's view, the 'Project' capstone unit, where students initiate and take full responsibility for the implementation and outcomes of their investigation, is widely regarded as the best capstone model for students to demonstrate course learning outcomes, knowledge, skills and abilities.
- If possible, incorporate two or three capstone units throughout a degree course, even though university timetables often lack the flexibility to cater for this.
- Identify specific pivotal skills and attributes for demonstration.
- Where possible, also focus on personal attributes such as flexibility, resilience and identity.

Things to avoid

- It is not recommended to use professional placements as the only capstone unit because of frequent reports of identified poor supervision and mentoring. Frequent discussions with students before, during and after the internship usually provided the most productive outcomes and experience.
- The prime emphasis should be on demonstration rather than on more input and assessments. Capstones, like The Project, allow students to show their knowledge, skills and the aptitudes they acquired in three years of undergraduate study.

Further reading and resources

- Cullen, T. (2017). [Capstone units and the transition from university to professional life](#). Australian Journalism Review 39(1), 85-94.
- Journalism Capstone website <https://journalismcapstoneunits.org>
- Capstone curriculum <http://www.capstonecurriculum.com.au>
- Types of capstones <http://www.capstonecurriculum.com.au/common-types-of-capstone-curriculum/>
- Australian Journalism review article <https://search.informit.com.au/fullText;dn=034091095437968;res=IELAPA>

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