Expert guide: Curriculum design and employability thinking

Professor Romy Lawson

Quality in teaching and learning is a key issue in higher education across multiple countries. Therefore, it is important for institutions to make explicit the expectations they have for their students and to assure that these expectations have been achieved.

How do we ensure that these attributes are developed during degree programs, and how can evidence that can leads to continuous improvement be captured?

The initial focus to achieve this is centred on curriculum design, making sure that a holistic, integrated, collaborative and maintainable approach is adopted to foster these expectations throughout the program. This approach is a cultural change for some academics, and so in conjunction with curriculum design, leadership strategies to support change must also be adopted.

Curriculum design and employability thinking

The curriculum is the core learning experience for students; it is the element through which a higher education institution can provide opportunities to develop skills and to evidence competence that has been verified by experts.

Designing holistic courses that centre on degree-level learning outcomes provides a scaffolded approach to this learning experience, with identified points for demonstrating these attributes. By writing learning outcomes that develop the employability thinking which will support graduates in their future lives and careers, leaders can design courses that foster this development and enable students to be career ready on graduation.

A central aspect of future-oriented curriculum design is the metacognitive orientation of the Developing EmployABILITY Initiative: namely, "employability thinking" which goes beyond skills and competences to develop students' development as "capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens" (Bennett, 2017).

Top tips

1. The most important element of this approach is collaboration across course (program) development teams. Approaching design in a whole-of-degree manner and working with other academics to achieve this demands a change of mindset for many educators who are used to designing at a subject level. This cultural change is powerful for both academics and for those students who experience the newly designed courses.

2. Design for the degree (or major/learning component) using the learning outcomes as the central focus for assessment and learning activity design. These learning outcomes can be used directly in individual units, and assessment rubrics can be developed to allow consistent marking for these learning outcomes.

3. The method has to be flexible as each context is different; thus, whereas I present an ideal design approach, I readily accept that each course team has to adapt this to their circumstances. For example, scaffolded assessment is problematic in courses that have open pathways, such as bachelor of arts degrees. Similarly, courses with multiple majors may have to adopt a cascade system to replicate the approach for each major rather than across the whole degree.

4. Write clear, degree-level learning outcomes that meet sector, industry, professional body and of course, student needs. Take the time to align these with external requirements such as qualifications frameworks, discipline standards and professional bodies; once these are correct, they are the backbone of the design work.

Things to avoid

- The approach to curriculum design is meant to allow flexibility for the type of degree being designed and the stage of design. However, in the majority of cases there are things to avoid.

- Do not map learning outcomes to individual units (modules) too soon as this disrupts the holistic, whole-of-degree approach. Designing learning activities and assessments to introduce, develop and assure these learning outcomes at the degree level will lead to a holistic learning experience that fosters development of key attributes.

- When it comes to curriculum mapping, do not over map: do not map all required elements throughout the whole design process. Map once to the degree-level learning outcomes and use those outcomes to map to individual units and assessments.

Materials and resources

There are multiple tools available to assist in whole-of-degree curriculum design. The following screenshots come from my Australian Fellowship work. The resources include a report, Curriculum design to assure learning; a free, online course design workbench to support curriculum design; an overview of curriculum design principles and templates for whole-of-degree design.

Contributed by Professor Trevor Cullen, Edith Cowan University, March 2018

Curriculum Design Workbench **DEV**   📓 My Courses   ⚙ Compliance Settings   ▦ Administration ▾

Edit Course - *Step 4 Rubric Development*

Rubric development of CLO 1 ▾

Synthesize a range of theories, laws and standards relevant to managing conflict in the workplace.

+	Criteria	Level 1 (below)	Level 1 (meets) Level 2 (below)	Level 1 (exceeds) Level 2 (meets) Level 3 (below)
	Grade Level 1 Level 2 Level 3	F	P C F	D HD P C F
−	Locates relevant and authoritative theories, laws and standards	Misses some of the major relevant theories, laws and standards for the particular	Locates the major relevant and authoritative theories, laws and standards for the particular	Locates a range of highly relevant and authoritative theories, laws and standards for the particular
−	Explain theories, laws and standards	Limited or basic explanation of the theories, laws and standards.	Comprehensive and highly advanced explanation of the theories, laws and	Comprehensive and highly advanced evaluation of the theories, laws and standards.

Mapping of CLOs

CLO	BX1124	BX1255	BX2123	BX2021	BX2022	BX3024	BX3032	BX3033	BX3122
K1	Introduced	Included	Developed	Included	Developed	Assured	Included	Assured	Assured
K2	Introduced		Developed	Developed	Developed	Assured	Assured		
K3			Developed					Assured	Assured
S1				Developed	Developed	Assured	Assured		Assured
S2	Introduced	Introduced	Developed	Developed	Developed	Assured		Assured	Assured
S3	Introduced	Introduced		Developed	Assured	Included	Assured		Assured
S4			Developed	Developed	Developed		Assured	Assured	
S5		Introduced		Included	Developed		Assured	Assured	
A1				Developed	Developed			Assured	Assured
A2	Introduced		Assured			Included	Included	Assured	
A3		Introduced			Included		Included		