

Principles for Designing a Curriculum to Develop and Assure Student Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Quality in teaching and learning is a key issue in Higher Education in Australia. Therefore it is important for institutions to be able to make the expectations they have for their students explicit and then assure that these expectations have been achieved. The question is how do we ensure that these attributes get developed during degree programs and how can evidence that can lead to continuous improvement be captured. The initial focus to achieve this has to be reviewing the curriculum design to make sure a holistic, integrated, collaborative and maintainable approach is being 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. This work is funded as part of an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, National Teaching Fellowship.

1. Introduction

The quality of business education standards in higher education has been a matter of much recent discontent and debate. Martell and Calderon [1] cite growing public dissatisfaction with the quality of higher education in the US, and the U.K. Government White Paper, 'Students at the Heart of the System' [2], set out the quality challenges of a changing higher education environment, recognising the need to strengthen the processes and to adapt and reinforce systems to improve practice. In Australia, responding to the Bradley Review [3], the government announced a landmark reform package for higher education that committed to ensuring that growth in the higher education system will be underpinned by a robust quality assurance and regulatory framework, this places a renewed emphasis on student outcomes and the quality of the student experience. Assurance of learning¹ (AoL) is

therefore a process that is of high importance in educational settings for both individual institutional developments, as well as to provide valid evidence to external constituents such as potential students, public officials, and accreditors, to demonstrate that the organisation is meeting its goals with built-in strategies for improvement.

However, assuring learning against standards is a complex task for academics and program administrators. Indeed, Coates [4] not only acknowledges the complexity of assessing, monitoring and enhancing academic standards, but also stresses the need for cultural change in order to better facilitate the process. Taylor et al. [5] noted that while all Australian universities make claims in policy and curriculum documentation about developing graduate attributes, the effective integration into programs has been somewhat intangible, resulting in students not fully engaging with the expectations of degree programs. In addition the B Factor Project (De la Harpe [6]) found that academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes and their low levels of confidence and willingness to teach and assess them must be acknowledged if universities are to progress in ensuring that graduates are equipped for the world of work. In light of this Oliver [7] has concluded that there is an urgent need for "new, efficient and effective ways of judging and warranting" graduate attributes (p.3).

2. Curriculum Design for AoL

Progressing from an earlier OLT funded project: *Hunters & Gatherers: Strategies for Curriculum Mapping and Data Collection for Assurance of Learning* (Lawson et al [8]), this fellowship work concentrates on supporting two areas of higher education, i) developing a curriculum and assessments that are conducive to developing graduate attributes and assuring learning; and ii) working with academic leaders to foster cultural change in adopting assurance of learning curriculum.

The support for curriculum design stems from a constructively aligned (Biggs [9]) whole of program

¹ Assurance of learning is a phrase used by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business to refer to the assessment

and documentation of program level learning outcomes/graduate attributes.

approach (Lawson, Freeman & Thompson [10]). Using the words of David Boud in a keynote address in 2012, this design approach considers “designing our courses such that students could not exit from participation in them without necessarily having met the learning outcomes”. This curriculum design method proposes that the initial stage of developing graduate attributes in students is to engage them, this is a continual task but it is vital that the students engage at the start of the learning experience if they are to fully benefit from it. This engagement can be promoted by making clear, explicit criteria and standards transparent to the learners so that they can see what is expected of them both for an individual task but also on completion of the degree program. In addition to this providing exemplars of the standards help aid this understanding as does modeling the desired skills. This engagement should be an interactive process whereby students are allowed opportunities to discuss, question, practice and even experience marking example work in order to gain a deeper understanding of what the criteria mean. It is during this engagement that teachers can start to provide feedforward to students to help them in the learning activity.

Following this engagement stage is the learning activity which has to be designed to capture an authentic, relevant task, in this way students can position their work in relation to industry/professional standards which helps them make judgments about their current performance level. The highest level of learning, that is the skills expected on completion of the degree program, should be set in these tasks but they are made progressive by increasing the complexity of the task and the standards needed to pass.

The last stage of the process is to provide feedback on the learning activity so that students can continue to improve their competency level over time. This feedback needs to provide information on the performance in relation to the current stage of learning but also in relation to the end of degree standards. By providing this information learners can then also use cues for future learning tasks. In addition comparing their own self-assessments with experts helps student to become more accurate in their judgments about the standards for the graduate attributes.

This is just one loop of the cycle which is repeated throughout the degree program until completion where the student is assessed to make sure they have reached the final standard expected of a graduate.

3. Conclusion

This paper will examine both the curriculum design principles as well as introducing the audience to the

coaching techniques and resources developed to support academics in their curriculum development. It will showcase both strategies and resources for supporting curriculum design with program teams. This will lead to designing curriculum that allows both the development and assurance of course learning outcomes through a holistic, integrated, collaborative and maintainable approach.

References

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Acknowledgement

Support for this project was provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd.