

Operationalising first year curriculum principles

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Introduction

This project builds on the *First Year Curriculum Project* that was carried out at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2006-2007 (QUT, 2007). One of the objectives of that project was “to develop principles for the Course Development processes that capture good design in first year curriculum practice” (p. 1) and this was achieved through the development of a set of broad organising principles for first year curriculum design—the First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) (Kift, 2008). These are:

- Transition The curriculum and its delivery should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students’ transition *from* their previous educational experience *to* the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning. The first year curriculum should be designed to mediate and support transition as a process that occurs over time. In this way, the first year curriculum will enable successful student transition into first year, through first year, into later years and ultimately out into the world of work, professional practice and career attainment.
- Diversity The first year curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students. First year curriculum design should recognise that students have special learning needs by reason of their social, cultural and academic transition. Diversity is often a factor that further exacerbates transition difficulties. The first year curriculum should take into account students’ backgrounds, needs, experiences and patterns of study and few if any assumptions should be made about existing skills and knowledge.
- “Diversity” in this context includes, for example:
- membership of at-risk or equity groups;
 - widening participation (e.g. non-traditional cohorts);
 - students’ existing skills and knowledge; and
 - patterns and timing of engagement with the first year curriculum (e.g. mid-year entry).
- Design First year curriculum design and delivery should be student-focussed, explicit and relevant in providing the foundation and scaffolding necessary for first year learning success. This requires that the curriculum must be designed to assist student development and to support their engagement with learning environments through the intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Engagement	Learning, teaching, and assessment approaches in the first year curriculum should enact an engaging and involving curriculum pedagogy and should enable active and collaborative learning. Learning communities should be promoted through the embedding in first year curriculum of active and interactive learning opportunities and other opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher-student interaction.
Assessment	The first year curriculum should assist students to make a successful transition to assessment in higher education, while assessment should increase in complexity from the first to later years of curriculum design. Critically, students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their program of study to aid their learning and to provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement.
Evaluation and monitoring	Good first year curriculum design is evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation that leads to curriculum development and renewal designed to improve student learning. The first year curriculum should also have strategies embedded to monitor all students' engagement in their learning and to identify and intervene in a timely way with students at risk of not succeeding or fully achieving desired learning outcomes (QUT, 2007, pp. 3-4).

At the conclusion of the *First Year Curriculum Project*, the work to be completed was the implementation or embedding of the principles within curriculum design. Some initial work on this was done by Nelson (2006) and Healy (2007). Nelson used a 5-stage model of:

- Principle: High level statement linking curriculum to overall first year philosophy;
 - Rationale: Empirical evidence supporting principle foundations;
 - Strategies: How the principle should be implemented;
 - Examples: Good practice at unit and course level; and
 - Evaluation: Measures for assessing principle implementation
- to develop several examples of how principles could be operationalised. Healy in similar vein used a WILLIP (What It Looks Like In Practice) approach to develop some examples relevant to education.

This paper reports on a more comprehensive extension of this early work; the development of a set of audience-specific, practitioner-focused “checklists” based on these broad, organising principles for use in the development and evaluation of first year curriculum.

The development and evaluation of checklists

Initial development

Working from the original principles, the work of Nelson and Healy and the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) project at the University of Ulster¹; the Senior Project Officer in the *Transitions in Project* (TIP) (QUT, 2008), Margot Duncan, began developing a set of role-based questions to put to Course Coordinators, Unit Coordinators, and Tutors. It also became apparent that, since new units and courses were being developed in a number of Faculties, there was a need for a set of questions to use in evaluating these units and courses. This led to the development of a set of questions for Evaluators. As the tasks of developing, implementing and evaluating any unit or course are enormous, “pools” of questions were developed with the idea of offering faculties, and unit and course developers an overview of the areas to be covered so that they could select a set of questions from the large pool.

Preliminary drafts of questions were reviewed, amended and refined by the TIP Team (Karen Nelson, Margot Duncan and Carole Quinn) and Sally Kift, the prime developer of the FYCPs, and also evaluated against the *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement*². A number of resources were used

¹ <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/about/about.htm>

² <http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse/>

to facilitate the development process³. This total process led to the production of final draft versions of the checklists:

- Course Coordinator’s Checklist
 - First Year Unit Coordinator’s Checklist
 - First Year Unit Writer’s Kit
 - First Year Tutor’s Checklist
 - Evaluator’s Question Pool
- all of which are accessible to QUT staff through the TIP wiki⁴

In an earlier QUT project, *Enhancing Transition @ QUT* (QUT, 2006), first year resources were identified and a database of metadata that described the resource and where it is located was developed. This database was enabled, updated and integrated into the First Year Unit Coordinator’s Checklist to facilitate the implementation of the FYCPs.

Trialling and evaluating the checklists

Generic process

Since the checklists could be quite imposing, if not somewhat threatening, it was decided that, to optimise the outcomes of the interaction between the checklists and the people for whom they were designed, a Facilitator would work through the following five phase process with the stakeholder(s):

Phase (Time) ⁵	Activities
1 (1 hour)	Pre-meeting preparation by the Facilitator
2 (30 minutes)	Stakeholders discuss main concerns for each of the 6 principles
3 (1 hour)	Stakeholders identify one main focus from the 6 principles and discuss in detail
4 (30 minutes)	The Facilitator uses lead questions in each of the other principle categories to get a general overview of progress in the other 5 principle areas
5 (1 hour)	Post-meeting notes and communication to stakeholders

An example

What follows are selected aspects of these phases as they applied to the evaluation of a core first year unit in the Faculty of Creative Industries, KKB102 *Creative Industries: Making Connections*. A fuller discussion of the implementation and outcomes of the evaluation are available in *Transitions In Project Report 014* (2008).

Phases 2 and 3

A “Discussion Starter”—a description of the FYCPs with adjoining space for comments—is used in these phases. What follows are samples of comments that resulted from the discussions with the relevant stakeholder, in this case, Judith Smith:

- Transition⁶
- Transitions issues are not considered so important in second semester⁷

³ <https://wiki.qut.edu.au/display/TIP/OView+FY+Principles+Checklist+%28Draft%29>

⁴ <https://wiki.qut.edu.au/display/TIP/SP02+Review%2C+Implementation+and+Evaluation+of+First+Year+Curriculum+Principles>.

⁵ Approximate only.

⁶ A full description of each principle as above is provided in the “Discussion Starter” but not here to save space.

⁷ KKB102 is a second semester unit.

- A group of international students will have mid-year entry and do need to be considered
- Some university processes will be new to second semester e.g. using teamwork technologies etc. so need to ensure clear introductions appropriate to first year for these
- Some tutors will be new to teaching in second semester so care with staff development is needed, particularly in relation to teamwork monitoring, developing relevance for multidisciplinary cohorts etc.

- Diversity
- The multidisciplinary nature of the cohort is a key concern
 - Activities aimed at developing students' self-direction e.g. ability to identify personal relevance, interest, strengths and weaknesses - may be included to help cater for multidiscipline cohort
 - Some resources have already been identified that might help students with key skills (e.g. self-learning modules) or provide advanced students with development options
 - Strategies need to be in place for the blind students who will be doing visual design activities in the unit
 - A good range of learning styles is required by the unit assignments e.g. oral, written, visual.

And so on . . .

Phase 4

Leading questions were drawn from the Evaluator's Question Pool. For example:

Transition (Orientation) [Leading question] *Is there a mid-year entry into this unit that needs orientation to university life and procedures?*

[Subsequent follow-up questions] For example: *Is there a strategy in place to identify students who miss orientation activities and ensure they receive the necessary orientation information?*

Transition (Staff) [Leading question] *Will any members of the teaching team be new to teaching First Year?*

[Subsequent follow-up questions] For example: *Is there a process in place for ensuring that teaching staff new to teaching in first year are connected with appropriate resources and support?*

And so on . . .

Conclusion

The next step in the development of the checklists is for the whole gamut to be trialled in a variety of disciplines to test their robustness. Thus far, activities have been/are being carried out in four faculties at QUT. Because of the course development activities occurring at QUT throughout 2008-2009, there will be opportunities in 2009+ to focus on all three aspects of development, implementation and evaluation.

Questions for discussion

How effective are checklists in promoting good practice in first year curriculum development, implementation and evaluation?

Is there a danger of promoting a "recipe mentality" towards these processes?

What are the alternatives?

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