

Guidelines for institutions

The often unique nature of capstone curriculum gives rise to particular tensions and complexities, and presents challenges for staff in design and delivery. As in the case of much of the capstone work, many of these areas are not exclusive to capstones, but have heightened importance in the capstone context. Our findings from the survey, interviews and case studies were reviewed and refined through national workshops and online networks. One of the outcomes of this process were a set of six key areas in which institutions can make a significant difference to the student and staff experience, and the quality of capstones more generally, formulated as a set of guidelines for institutions:

1. Enable innovative curriculum and assessment approaches

It is important to recognise the multiplicity of ways in which capstones can address program learning outcomes as well as the principles of capstones, and the benefits to student learning experiences and outcomes when creative models are used. Standardised approaches to curriculum and assessment, particularly when embedded in policy, can become a barrier to the design of innovative capstone experiences. While strong educational rationales, clarity and cohesiveness should form the basis for any decisions regarding approvals, institutions should ensure that staff involved in approvals processes are provided the remit to support non-standard approaches where they are in the best interests of student experience and curricula innovation.

2. Support flexible scheduling and workload patterns

Great capstones often exemplify flexible, student-centred delivery, including intensive periods of activity outside of standard class times for both staff and students. They also often involve external deadlines, stakeholders and suppliers who do not necessarily fit well with university calendars. This can pose operational challenges for University systems organised to manage consistent delivery in standard modes over a set period of time. Wherever possible, universities should endeavour to provide flexibility in the approach to timetabling, organisation of workloads and schedules for non-standard patterns of delivery.

3. Require whole-of-program design

The design of capstones that effectively integrate and expand prior learning is a complex task, particularly where prior student experiences are diverse, or where important skills have not been developed and deepened over a series of prior subjects. Although program structures and student choice can make whole of program design challenging, doing so provides the context for coherent and progressive development of students' capacity to take on the integrative and demanding nature of capstone work, and to meet program level learning outcomes. Wherever possible, universities should ensure that their systems, processes, policies and practices actively support coordinated program design.

4. Undertake tailored capstone design

While there are often subjects available that lend themselves to adaptation as capstone curriculum, it is important to be mindful that the capstone experience fulfils a specific set of purposes. When implementing capstones, care should be taken to ensure that the curriculum is designed from 'the ground up'. Design should focus on ensuring that the curriculum provides students with an exceptional culminating and transitional final year experience, sufficiently weighted to acknowledge the significance of the effort and complexity involved.

5. Encourage benchmarking and shared practice

Staff and students report significant benefits from carrying out collaborative delivery and benchmarking with other institutions, either locally or internationally. This may involve staff collaborations or cross-institutional peer review. Such activities provide professional development and build confidence and establish benchmarks for outcome quality. The student experience can also be shared across institutions and organisations – it is not uncommon to find students working on the same project briefs or challenges and/or collaborating with one another. Wherever possible, universities should ensure that such partnerships are actively supported and acknowledged through institutional networks, policies and procedures.

6. Collectively celebrate and affirm

An important principle of capstone design is that of dissemination and celebration. While general dissemination is an important motivator for students, institutionally supported public celebration provides an opportunity for the university to publicly highlight the quality and importance of the program and its students. Where there is a collective celebration, the public acknowledgement is amplified. However, such celebration requires support in the form of space, coordination and publicity. Universities should consider the ways in which capstone outcome dissemination could become a whole-of-institution event and a public marker of the graduation experience.

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