Work Integrated Learning as a component of the capstone experience in undergraduate law

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Overview

• Capstone project and principles for a capstone experience

• Role of WIL as part of a capstone experience in law
Curriculum Renewal in Legal Education: Articulating Final Year Curriculum Design Principles and a Final Year Program

ALTC Funded Project
Improving capstone experiences though curriculum renewal

• Literature suggests that universities, and law schools in particular, are not engaging final year students in a genuine capstone experience which supports the development of their professional identity and their transition out of university.

• Project aims to enhance the learning experience by renewing the final year curriculum of law through:

  • articulation of a set of curriculum design principles for the capstone experience

  • design of a transferable model for an effective capstone experience
Capstone Defined

• A capstone experience is typically defined as:

  a crowning (unit) or experience coming at the end of a sequence of (units) with the specific objective of integrating a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole. As a rite of passage, this (unit) provides an experience through which undergraduate students both look back over their undergraduate curriculum in an effort to make sense of that experience, and look forward to a life by building on that experience.

  Durel, 1993, 223
Two Key Objectives

• Closure
• Transition

Achieved through:

• Reflective Practice
• Bruner’s Spiral Curriculum
Closure

• The capstone experience should be designed to provide an integrated learning experience that provides closure by:

  • Supporting students to synthesise and build upon their learning in the program through the integration of existing knowledge and skills;

  • Building upon the knowledge, skills and capability development that has taken place over the entirety of the curriculum;

  • Providing enhanced opportunities for reflection on the student's personal and professional development over the course of their legal education experience and how that prepares them for their future professional and personal life; and

  • Assisting students to attain an understanding of what it means to be a graduate of the discipline and begin to develop a professional identity.
Transition

• In order to support transition to professional practice the capstone experience should:

  • Be explicit in assisting students to begin to develop a sense of professional identity and transition into a diverse range of professional destinations;

  • Consolidate students' lifelong learning skills, resilience, self-confidence and self-efficacy as the foundation for their future professional and personal lives;

  • Provide opportunities for students to consolidate their career development and planning processes;

  • Enable students to enhance their professional skills and competencies so they can be applied in complex environments post graduation; and

  • Assist students to use their university education in their roles as ethical citizens and leaders in the global community.
Reflective Practice

• Enables students to achieve closure on their university learning

• Personal and professional development

• Acquisition and refinement of higher order cognitive skills including critical thinking

• Reinforces student’s sense of accomplishment

• Develop as ethically socially responsible practitioners

• Personal self reflection is essential to the successful transition to professional practice
Bruner’s Spiral Curriculum

...Learning should not only take us somewhere, it should allow us to go further more easily.

- Bruner 1960

- Unique place of capstone within the course

- Constructivist approach ensures previous learning is integrated into a whole which creates for students a sense of completeness

- New theoretical material may be introduced to expand knowledge in order to support transition
Capstone Principles

1. Closure through Curriculum Design
2. Transition Out
3. Diversity
4. Engagement
5. Assessment
6. Evaluation and Monitoring
Role of WIL as part of a capstone experience in law
Definition of Work Integrated Learning

“An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum”

(Patrick et al 2008)

Includes not just placement but other authentic experiences that have a link to industry
Importance of WIL to capstone experience in law

• Experiential learning opportunities seen as an element of capstones (eg internships, research projects, study abroad programs, theses, specialist seminars, and field trips)

• Strong demand from law students for capstone experiences emphasising legal practice

• WIL contributes to the development of professional identity

• WIL helps to develop confidence

• WIL helps prepare students for transition to professional practice

BUT
... WIL alone does not necessarily provide all elements of a capstone experience

- WIL is limited in providing closure on undergraduate education
- Experiential component of WIL is often not controlled by the University
- Ability to provide WIL experience to large numbers of UG law students is limited

WIL should be viewed as one component part of a larger capstone ‘experience’, rather than a capstone experience in its own right
Thank you

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