



LAW CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

Capstone Experiences Principles and Commentary

CURRICULUM RENEWAL IN LEGAL EDUCATION: CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES IN LAW

This booklet provides a brief outline of the principles and commentary for designing capstone experiences. For more detailed information download the project *Toolkit* from the project website below.

This project has identified core curriculum principles necessary to design and deliver successful capstone experiences for final year students. Each of these principles has been expanded upon in a set of '**Notes on the Principles**', which highlight the relevant research and include quotes from the project data. The **Notes** on each of the **Principles** are contained in the **Toolkit** available on the project website.

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Project website

wiki.qut.edu.au/display/capstone/Home

www.lawcapstoneexperience.com

Capstone experiences principles and commentary

Capstone experiences curriculum principles

The design of capstone experiences may vary significantly; different frameworks may be used (for example, a disciplinary or inter-disciplinary focus or to satisfy professional accreditation requirements), rationales and objectives may differ, and a variety of models utilised (for example, an integrated final year program, a single subject, a suite of subjects, or modules within several subjects). Broadly however capstone experiences should provide final year students with an opportunity both to look back over their academic learning, in an effort to make sense of what they have accomplished, and also to look forward to their professional and personal futures that build on that foundational learning.

In the context of an increasing regulatory and quality focus on assuring academic standards and student achievement of program learning outcomes, capstone experiences should be intentionally designed to promote reflection on, and the integration and synthesis of, whole-of-program learning by requiring student demonstration of consolidated, integrative and transferable learning. In this way, capstone experiences may contribute to assurance of learning and provide students with a sense of closure to the academic

experience and completion as a graduate of the discipline.

It should be recognised that students face significant, and often quite diverse, transitional issues in the final stages of their university learning as they prepare for the next career phase and for uncertainty, complexity and endemic change in their future professional and personal lives as engaged global citizens. A further key objective of capstone experiences therefore is to be future focussed; to enable students to make connections between their academic learning and future professional contexts by mediating a positive transition from student identity to beginning professional identity or further study (for example, through career development learning and attention to the formation of professional identity).

Given the significance of the transitional issues facing final year students, which it has been argued are just as challenging as those facing first year students entering the tertiary environment (Jervis and Hartley 2005, 314), a transition pedagogy similar to that identified as appropriate to first year (Kift 2009) should be applied in the final year of legal education. Accordingly the principles applicable to the final year mirror

those applicable to the first year. The design of effective capstone experiences should address the following six interconnected principles as further explicated below.

While these principles have been developed in the context of legal education, they are equally applicable across disciplines. However in the legal context specifically, given the nature of the degree as a professional qualification, there is a particular emphasis on the preparation of students “to practice law effectively and responsibly in the contexts they are likely to encounter as new lawyers” (Stuckey et al 2007, 28).

References:

- Jervis, K. J., and C.A. Hartley. 2005. *Learning to design and teach an accounting capstone. Issues in Accounting Education*, 20(4), 311-339.
- Kift, S. 2009. *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education: Final Report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program*. Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council. www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/transitionpedagogy
- Stuckey, R.T., M. Barry, R.B. Dinerstein, J.C. Dubin, R. Engler, J.S. Elson. 2007. *Best practices for legal education: A vision and a road map*. Columbia, South Carolina.

Capstones are typically defined as

a crowning (unit/subject) or experience coming at the end of a sequence of (units/subjects) with the specific objective of integrating a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole. As a rite of passage, this (unit/subject) 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.

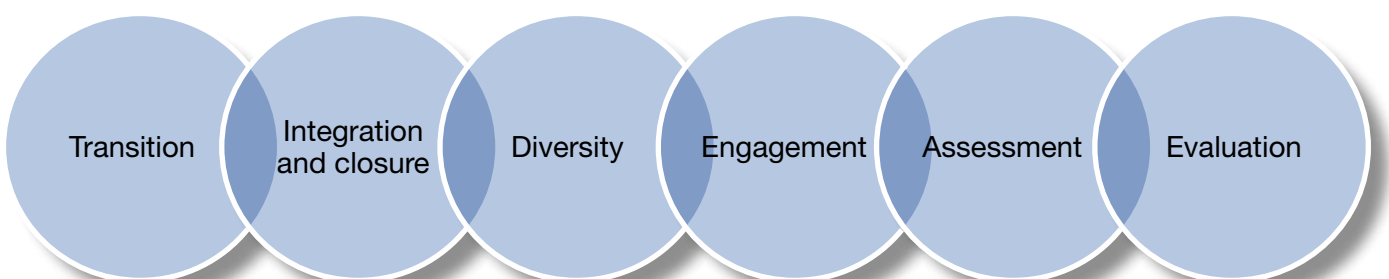
Durel, R. J. (1993, 223).

(The capstone course: A rite of passage. *Teaching Sociology*, 21(3), 223-225).

Favourable conditions

The efficacy of capstone experiences will be affected by the curriculum context within which they are offered. Favourable conditions, which promote the effectiveness of capstone experiences, include:

- Taking a **whole-of-program approach** to curriculum design;
- Identifying **program learning outcomes** that take into account the discipline threshold learning outcomes, the institution's graduate attributes, professional accreditation requirements and the institution's and/or the law school's mission(s);
- Embedding and **incrementally developing** the program learning outcomes throughout the program to assure student preparedness to engage in the higher order cognitive and affective processes required
- Assuring the acquisition of the program learning outcomes at **checkpoints** throughout the program (for example, by use of a student ePortfolio);
- Fostering a **quality learning environment** and good teaching and learning support within the law school and/or institution;
- Ensuring that the capstone experiences are mediated through **intentionally designed curricula** and co-curricula;
- Ensuring that the capstone experiences delivered are appropriately **supported and resourced** and that the associated logistics and risks (for example, occupational health and safety, ethics clearances, intellectual property, etc) are identified and managed proactively;
- Ensuring staff are developed, **valued and rewarded** for their capstone-focused perspective and partnerships; and
- Providing **institutional support** to ensure that the conditions that promote successful student transition out of the university and into the world of work, professional practice and future learning are appropriately resourced and are sustainable over time.



Principles

Transition

An effective capstone experience supports **transition** by:

- Drawing on students' self-management and other legal skills to deal with uncertainty, complexity and change;
- Assisting students in beginning to develop a sense of professional identity; and
- Supporting students to manage their career planning and development.

Integration and Closure

An effective capstone experience provides **integration and closure** by:

- Supporting students to integrate, synthesise and extend their learning in the program; and
- Enabling students to attain a sense of completion and an understanding of what it means to be a law graduate and a global citizen.

Diversity

An effective capstone experience responds to **diversity** by:

- Enhancing students' capacity to engage with diversity in professional contexts; and
- Being inclusive of all students.

Engagement

An effective capstone experience promotes student **engagement** by:

- Requiring students to assume active roles, to apply their learning in realistic, authentic and unfamiliar contexts and to take responsibility for their own work; and
- Providing opportunities for reflection to enable students to make connections between their learning and professional contexts and to assist the development of their professional identity.

Assessment

An effective capstone experience recognises the culminating nature of the experience by:

- Aligning assessment practice to the capstone principles; and
- Requiring students to make appropriate use of feedback and to reflect on their own capabilities and performance

Evaluation

An effective capstone experience:

- Should be regularly evaluated to ensure its relevance, coherence and alignment with the program;
- Contributes to the whole-of-program evaluation; and
- Contributes to the demonstration of student attainment of the discipline learning outcomes.

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