



Embedding academic literacies and skills into courses through graduate competency maps

Steve Briggs

University of Bedfordshire, UK

Presentation abstract

The University of Bedfordshire will launch our updated Curriculum Framework in autumn 2024. A core feature will be for all courses to include a Graduate Development Pathway which spans pre-arrival, induction, first assessment, on course teaching, and beyond graduation. A central part of the pathway is a universal 'learning to learn' six-week induction that addresses the development of core academic literacies and skills. This is then followed by course specific graduate competency maps that outline how institutional graduate competencies are developed across units within a course. Institutional graduate competencies such as 'communication', 'problem solving', and 'digital learning' align to topics historically supported by our Learning Development Team. As such, it is pivotal that the Learning Development Team is involved in the development of these maps.

Our approach to developing Graduate Pathways will therefore position Learning Developers at the heart of curriculum co-creation. Course teams will work in partnership with our Learning Development Team (along with Careers and Employability Advisors) to develop graduate competency maps. This empowers Learning Developers to draw upon their expertise and support the embedding of academic literacies and skills across the institution. This both positions and recognises the LD team as institutional experts in 'learning to learn' and mitigates the need for our LD Team to 'fight against the notion that we are teaching 'study skills' in a deficit way' (Hood, 2023, p.200) as often still seems to remain the case in the HE sector. I foresee (and hope) that 'Learning Development for the future' will see more universities introducing similar processes that facilitate and empower Learning Development teams to share their expertise. This in turn would mean the 'third space' (Holley and Biggins, 2023, p.84) typically occupied by Learning Developers will become increasingly expansive in the future.

Keywords: graduate competencies; learning to learn; curriculum framework.

Community response

Embedding employability into the curriculum is essential. Students frequently struggle to link (and therefore articulate for themselves and potential employers) learning across the various units of their programme as well as seeing the value of power (transversal) skills they are learning alongside their academic study. Anything which can be done to join this up for students and make it more visible is very helpful for career planning. The categories of Begin, Thrive and Succeed are useful to map across the different academic years. It was also interesting to hear how working with graduate attributes can help us, as Learning Developers, to embed skills. This initiative affords students with the skills they need to be successful both academically and in the workplace.

Rather than us all fighting to embed our particular sets of skills, it does appear that if we can all get behind a core set of skills, we make life easier for our academics, for students to understand, and we get to also raise the profile of what we do, and indeed participants expressed the desire to speak to their own institutions' careers teams for advice on implementing these ideas. The learning to learn approach offers a lot of exposure for LD which can only be beneficial for both students and practitioners, and could be instigated more widely to promote the value of LD.

Next steps and additional questions

- What challenges were met institutionally in embedding core employability skills into new modules?
- How were existing (already validated) modules revised to include the core employability skills?
- What was the impact of this initiative on students?

Author's reflection

Thank you to those who attended my session and shared their feedback. It was very encouraging to receive such positive comments during the online session and via the community response regarding the approach that we are adopting at Bedfordshire. I have responded to the next steps and additional questions that were raised.

A major challenge when undertaking institutional curriculum change relates to how to consistently embed new priorities into existing courses. The University of Bedfordshire instigated a Curriculum Change Programme in 2022 which set out curriculum enhancement priorities related to employability, inclusivity, and mental well-being. Academics teams then worked to review and update courses accordingly. The Curriculum Change Programme priorities were subsequently used to underpin development of the new Curriculum Framework.

During AY23/24, the university appointed an Academic Lead (Employability) in each of our faculties. These colleagues led work to establish the extent to which curriculum change programme priorities (including graduate competencies) had successfully been embedded into existing courses. The findings from this work in turn informed development of Course Enhancement Plans.

For AY24/25, we updated our institutional assessment brief template to require course teams to indicate how the assessment supports the development of the University of Bedfordshire graduate competencies.

We also worked with our Quality and Standards team to ensure there is a requirement for academic teams to provide critical reflections around how they have responded to the Curriculum Framework when developing a new course. As such, how the Employability Strand was integrated will address the embedding of graduate competencies.

Given that the new Curriculum Framework was launched in May 2024, we will be able to evaluate the impact on student outcomes and learning experience as it becomes progressively established. I plan to share further reflections and findings with the Learning Development community as our curriculum transformation journey progresses.

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References

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Author details

Steve Briggs is Director for Learning and Teaching Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire. Steve is a former Co-Chair of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education and currently a member of the Committee for the Association of National Teaching Fellows. He is a Chartered Psychologist, National Teaching Fellow (2020) and PFHEA.

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