

# **Enhancing the first year experience in higher education: Curriculum innovation and the student learning journey**

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## **Abstract**

*An academically cohesive, relevant, and rigorous undergraduate curriculum is required to retain, sustain, and graduate knowledgeable, professional, and valued citizens. Cognisant of this, staff at Edith Cowan University have co-constructed Curriculum 2012, an undergraduate curriculum framework which enables student transition to higher education and university life. Central to this curriculum innovation is the notion of 'learning journey' - a university-wide developmental and cohesive approach to learning, teaching and assessment. Curriculum 2012 authors sourced higher education and FYE literature and utilized this to design, plan, and justify the philosophies, principles and practices that direct Curriculum 2012. This paper describes Curriculum 2012 and demonstrates through the literature why and how these features were designed to enhance FYE for commencing students. FYE is located within the three key features of ECU's curriculum framework: Employability Oriented; Student Focused Environment; Learner-Centred Teaching. The paper concludes with an overview of the curriculum implementation to enhance FYE.*

## **Introduction**

In terms of enhancing the first year experience (FYE) in higher education, Kift believes that the way ahead is clear and lies in the development of coherent and sustainable, institution-wide initiatives (2008, p.1). She argues that "our policies, processes and practices, particularly our first year learning and teaching approaches and related support delivery – are integrated, coordinated and intentional in aid of early student learning, engagement and success". Kift and Moody (2009) urge a 'top down bottom up approach' which seeks to identify, acknowledge and coordinate the various FYE efforts that may already be underway in disparate fashion within a university. Previous studies have pointed to the piecemeal ways in which FYE have been addressed (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

Cognisant of the need to embrace an institution-wide approach to FYE, Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia has co-constructed an undergraduate curriculum framework which enables students to make a successful transition to academic study and

participate actively in university life. The conceptualising and implementing of this curriculum framework seeks to make the FYE “everybody’s business” (Kift, 2008, p. 1) and to unite the efforts of academic, administrative and support areas into a coherent and sustainable plan for action.

In this paper the authors describe an ECU initiative ‘Curriculum 2012’ and its central notion of the ‘learning journey’. Three key features of ECU’s curriculum framework: Employability Oriented; Student Focused Environment; Learner Centred Teaching are presented and described in terms of how these features are designed to systemically enhance FYE for commencing students through their undergraduate learning journey. The paper includes what is considered ‘good practice’ to enhance FYE and relates the ECU story, supported by the literature. Therefore rather than present the literature ‘up front’ the authors have integrated the literature with the actions and story. The paper concludes with a brief outline of how the curriculum framework is being implemented to progress and enhance FYE.

### **Curriculum 2012: A broad coherent plan**

Curriculum 2012 provides a broad coherent plan that guides learning, teaching and assessment for all undergraduate courses at ECU. It also provides a common language for communicating about learning, teaching and assessment across the University. Its vision is to provide active learning opportunities designed to graduate knowledgeable, professional and valued citizens who engage critically with, and contribute to, the future and sustainability of their local, national and international communities.

Curriculum 2012 was informed by the literature on higher education curriculum, Australian federal government reports, especially: *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) and *Universities, Innovation and Education Revolution* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) which sets out the vision for the future for higher education. Curriculum 2012 embraces this vision, in particular an uncapped demand driven university system from 2012, and goals for attainment and low socio-economic status (SES) enrolment. Curriculum 2012 was predominantly created through an ECU-wide consultative process (March to May 2010) which included staff and student interviews, forums, and web-based (Blackboard) discussions.

### **Curriculum 2012: The learning journey**

Curriculum 2012 is centred on the notion of a developmentally organized student learning journey. ‘The learning journey’ is used as a metaphor for the undergraduate experience and this notion is vividly captured in the Curriculum 2012 masthead: Curriculum 2012 and Beyond: Enabling the learning journey. The choice of the word ‘enabling’ is deliberate and intentional; it signals that the model is not a support or deficit model but rather, one that ‘enables’ the learner to chart and monitor his or her own learning journey by providing the right environment, opportunities and resources. The three stages of the student learning journey are:

**Start of course:** focuses on commencing students’ FYE, with a particular emphasis on their goal setting, learning plan, self-confidence, and academic literacy skills. It also emphasises the need to develop and/or enhance students’ cognitive, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and cultural self (i.e., whole person).

**Mid course:** focuses on providing students with inquiry-based and knowledge creation learning experiences and outcomes, and, where appropriate, the opportunity to apply knowledge in authentic workplaces or professional placements.

**End of course:** focuses on preparing students to be career aware; professionally ready; and to graduate as informed, civic, humane, ethical and moral citizens who value and sustain the ideals of lifelong learning, democracy and citizenship.

### **Curriculum 2012: Features**

Curriculum 2012 includes three key features: Employability Oriented, Student Focused Environment & Learning Centred Teaching. These three features are distinctive to ECU, reflect the University's mission and vision, and underpin the concept of learning journey. The features are designed to facilitate learning for university success with a particular emphasis on FYE and are described in the following paragraphs.

*The Employability Oriented* feature refers to the preparation of our graduates for the world of work and lifelong learning. At the 'start of course' Curriculum 2012 focuses on building first year students' self confidence, communication skills and the capacity to work in teams.

The transition literature abounds with learning, teaching and assessment strategies designed to facilitate students' transition to higher education study, academic success and positive attitudes towards lifelong learning. Although responsibility rests with universities to develop and implement policies and procedures that enhance student learning, students' personal goals are also a key factor in assisting them to determine their study path, overcome difficulties, and continue at university. In facing challenges whilst at university, persistence and success are underpinned by students having 'clear goals, career aspirations' (Kinnear, Middleton, Boyce, Sparrow, & Cullity (2008a). Curriculum 2012 focuses on commencing students setting goals, creating a learning plan, developing self-confidence and advancing their academic literacy skills; all of which lead to employability skills that are practical and cross learning domains. A key tool that students may use to demonstrate and achieve the aforementioned skills, chart and monitor their career and learning journey is an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio). The ePortfolio is a means of capturing student goals, learning plan, learning experiences, professional reflections, and evidence of achieving graduate attributes and accreditation standards. The ePortfolio provides for a developmental process as it builds on, develops and illustrates students' existing skills, knowledge, and capabilities and allows the individual to determine their own strengths and needs, chart and monitor these strengths and needs (Cambridge, 2008). Over time this allows the student to understand what they need to do to achieve their desired career or occupation. This is an integral aspect of developing and demonstrating employability.

*The Student Focused Environment* feature emphasises *students first*. This is advanced through the University's commitment to an environment which views the student experience from a 'whole person' perspective and endeavours to enable successful learning in a culture of care and ease of transition. The ethos of care outlined in Student Focused Environment includes a range of services that enhance and enable the student experience. These services exist to support all students within the University and ECU has various strategies to ensure that students are informed about all available services and are able to access these services readily. Curriculum 2012 acknowledges that the whole person is of particular significance in the Start of Course phase. A range of activities are conducted at ECU to facilitate this such as open days which involve family and friends of the University. Curriculum 2012 places

importance on all interpersonal relationships and encourages all staff (both academic and professional/administrative) of the University to reflect on their interactions with others and to utilize strategies which assist them to enthuse, empathise with, and provide support to all students to enhance and enable the student experience, with particular care for those making the transition into the first year of university life.

The learning environment has a powerful influence on student persistence and success (Kinnear, Sparrow, Boyce & Middleton, 2008b) and the important development of a sense of belonging can be enhanced through the curriculum (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010; Kift, 2008; Wingate, 2007). The link between engagement at first year level and success and retention is well established (Adams, et al., 2010; Kift & Moody, 2009). A major driver behind the systemic approach to FYE is the growing body of literature which reports on the apparent lack of student engagement in university life, both social (James et al., 2010; Yorke & Longden cited in Leese, 2010, p. 243) and academic (James et al., 2010) of contemporary tertiary level students. Engagement with university life can be supported by appropriate curriculum that facilitates student contact in and outside the classroom.

Student Focused Environment shows its responsiveness to the University's diversity of student backgrounds and entry pathways. It acknowledges that learning is a lifelong process and that flexible pathways of admission, transfer and exit are fundamental strategies. Bradley et al., (2008, p. 28) discuss the importance of such flexibility if "Australia is to make the most of the talents of all its people". In relation to FYE, the flexibility of admission pathways is particularly pertinent. At ECU there is a range of admission pathways for non-matriculated learners and matriculated students whose qualifications are no longer valid.

Academically capable students who attend university via an alternative admission pathway may experience cultural, institutional, dispositional and/or situational barriers to participating in higher education (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite, & Godfrey, 2004; Kantanis, 2002; Cullity, 2005). Curriculum 2012 outlines the need for a university wide understanding of, and support for students entering via these pathways. Krause (2006) argues that 21<sup>st</sup> century students think of themselves as 'clients' of their universities and expect that 'seamless support' should be available to them anytime and anywhere.

The Curriculum 2012 focus on 'the student first' means that strategies are required to identify, monitor, and enable students who are 'at risk' of failing academically, or withdrawing from study. Sub-groups such as those who enter via alternative pathways may be more likely to be deemed 'at risk' of academic failure or withdrawing from study. Other sub-groups may include equity background students. According to James, et al., (2010) there is a small but persistently disengaged and dissatisfied group of first years in most universities who would benefit from early identification and support.

The third feature, *Learner-Centred Teaching*, is fundamental to Curriculum 2012 as it considers students' prior knowledge, experiences, interests, goals, needs and capabilities, with a focus on creating a supportive and collaborative learning environment. Within this constructivist approach, learning and teaching actively engages students in: planning their learning journey; researching and understanding knowledge; synthesising, creating and applying knowledge; and thinking about the purposes and consequences of their new knowledge. Learner-centred teaching shifts from the traditional mode of teacher-expert to teacher and students learning with and from each other.

Drawing from the work of Delors (1998) and Barnett, Parry, and Coate (2001), Curriculum 2012 provides staff with features, principles, practices, and philosophies that enable them to develop each student's:

- knowledge and knowledge creation (Knowing);
- application of knowledge, abilities and skills (Doing); and,
- attributes of self and ability to live and work with others/the whole person (Being).

It is expected that these three “domains” of the curriculum will be both ‘represented’ and ‘integrated’ into the curriculum (Barnett, et al., 2001, p. 438; Delors, 1998, p. 86). Barnett (2009, p. 429) states that a curriculum is a “vehicle for effecting change in human beings through particular encounters with knowledge”. Curriculum 2012 at a FYE level is designed to enable and enhance the start of the student learning journey.

A higher education constructivist approach to learning and teaching also includes ‘assessment’. The notion of ‘assessment for learning’ is drawn from constructivist ideals and places assessment at the core of all student learning. It shifts the emphasis from testing students’ reproduction of knowledge to providing them with appropriate, authentic/real world assessment tasks (i.e., formative or summative) that engage them in learning, with the aim of producing learners who can make judgements about their learning, values, knowledge, and professional ethics and capabilities (Boud, 2010). It stresses the importance of aligning the purpose of assessment across a course and, also, to student and graduate long-term learning. Towards this end, Curriculum 2012 requires staff to:

- map assessment across a course and its units;
- align assessment to course/unit aims, content, delivery, learning outcomes and graduate attributes;
- consider student background with the aim of assisting teachers to plan effective learning and assessment tasks; and,
- design tasks that engage students in learning at an inquiry, experiential, problem or authentic level.

‘Good’ curriculum design, which includes the assessment process, lays the foundation upon which staff can engage with first year students and involve them in high quality learning (Kift, 2008). The FYE assessment-based recommendations included in Curriculum 2012 reflect the curriculum and assessment ideas revealed by Kift and Moody (2009). The use of “innovative, active, and constructivist instructional approaches” of learning and teaching is supported in the higher education literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, cited by Kift, 2008 point 4: Engagement) and opportunities for active and collaborative learning for both on and off campus students help create a sense of belonging in students (Krause, 2006) which (James et al., 2010) believe is often lacking. These constructivist practices should assist first year students make the transition to higher education study.

Therefore, the three features of ECU’s Curriculum 2012 demonstrate a strong link with the academic literature that indicates the opportunity for the adoption of such strategies to support and enhance the FYE.

### **Enhancing FYE: Implementing Curriculum 2012**

We conclude this paper with a brief outline of how Curriculum 2012 is being implementing to enhance FYE. Curriculum 2012 has been designed as an emerging curriculum which will evolve with the advances made in disciplinary areas, knowledge, research, learning and teaching to the benefit of commencing as well as continuing students.

Curriculum 2012 includes two implementation phases. 'Phase one: Course alignment with the framework' was completed in early 2011; 'Phase two: Embedding Curriculum 2012 features, principles, and practices into institutional infrastructure and course delivery'. The main aim of the second phase is to develop and embed the Curriculum 2012 philosophy, principles and practices into the University's infrastructure and academic programmes (2011 to 2014). This phase will enable relevant and engaged undergraduate student learning to be implemented into course design and, thereby, achieve intended generic and disciplined-based graduate outcomes. The second phase has 4 stages, specifically:

- Stage 1 (2011) has preceded the launch of Curriculum 2012 (i.e., Start of course).
- Stage 2 (2012) will precede students' Mid course experience (2013).
- Stage 3 (2013) will precede students' End of course (2014).
- Stage 4 (2014) will focus a comprehensive and consolidated evaluation of the Curriculum 2012's intended generic and discipline based graduate and project outcomes.

Each stage has a general objective with specific areas of focus.

Stages 1 to 3 articulate with Curriculum 2012's focus on the 'learning journey', and these stages follow the Start/Mid/End developmental process of the Curriculum 2012. The intention is to start building student capacity prior to them entering the Start, Mid, or End of course stage of their study. The Plan, Do, Review, Improve (PDRI) cycle will be used as the ongoing review process in all stages. The PDRI cycle will focus in Stage 4 (2014) on a comprehensive and consolidated evaluation of Curriculum 2012 intended generic and discipline-based graduate outcomes and project outcomes of the strategies.

#### *Stage 1, 2011: The first year experience*

The theme for 2011 (Stage 1) is the First Year Experience. The overarching aim of Stage 1 is to advance the University's capacity to improve graduate employability (Curriculum 2012 Feature 1); to create a student focused environment (Curriculum 2012 Feature 2); and learner-centred teaching (Curriculum 2012 Feature 3) which facilitate transition to all aspects of university life including quality of learning – the basis of a fulfilling, enjoyable, and successful FYE that results in student retention, sustainability and finally graduation. Seven broad strategies are being applied to meet this aim. These strategies are described and the literature that underpins their adoption is indicated. The strategies are:

**1. The establishment of a staff led group (SLG) to identify, grow and enable FYE ideas, strategies, and outcomes.** The SLG comprises a University-wide mix of academic and professional/administrative staff, some of whom are in leadership and management positions. The purpose of the SLG is to:

- a) Act as a consultative group;
- b) Advance established networks within the University; assist with change; and review, comment and consult about the implementation of Curriculum 2012; and,
- c) Participate in professional development and the scholarship of teaching, learning, and assessment within faculties and schools. This purpose is in keeping with Krause et al's'. (2005) advocacy for institution-wide change led by 'champions' of the FYE cause, and Kift and Moody's (2009) promotion of a 'top down, bottom up' approach.

2. **The design of an integrated University-wide FYE strategic plan** that has explicit strategies to enable first year transition. These strategies include mentoring programs, academic literacy development, learning enabling programs, monitoring to identify ‘at-risk’ students, and websites showcasing ideas and strategies.

3. **The formation of a special interest group (SIG)** to further develop the University’s infrastructure in support of English language and numeracy skills development, including post-enrolment language assessment (PELA), post-enrolment numeracy assessment (PENA), and course-based assessments. This includes consolidating existing resources and initiating additional learning opportunities for first year students who need to improve their English language and numeracy skills.

4. **The development of assessment for learning principles and practices** in all first-year undergraduate units with evidence of authentic, inquiry-based, formative, constructive activities. This includes conducting professional development on assessment for learning for all academic staff (e.g., assessment design and feedback practices, peer assessment). Early formative, meaningful feedback on learning progress is fundamental to student retention and learning.

5. **The internationalisation of the curriculum** by building staff capacity to be more responsive to our international students. This involves researching, planning and delivering professional learning to ECU staff so that they enhance their capacity to prepare, implement, deliver and evaluate a curriculum that is ‘culturally responsive’ to international students’ learning backgrounds and needs.

6. **The improvement of flexible delivery** – a term at ECU which refers to: “courses and units [that] are delivered in ways that recognise and cater for diversity in the needs and expectations of students” (ECU, Learning & Teaching Principles, 2008). This learning and teaching ‘bottom-up’ approach places students’ needs to the fore. It requires academics to consider whether face-to-face, online or a mix of on-campus and off-campus mode of delivery enables student learning. Normand, Littlejohn, and Falconer (2008, p. 26) cite others who suggest that a ‘teaching and learning management’ model of flexible delivery shifts the “control of learning” from the teacher or institution to the student. Offering students an accessible and appropriate array of delivery modes allows them to choose their preferred mode of learning.

7. **ECU has state of the art facilities**, ranging from wireless coverage for computers everywhere on campus to a wide selection of courses that are available for study off campus. One of the main challenges in using e-learning is to carefully consider, plan, and design material that ‘supports’ face-to-face delivery and learning and, ultimately, adds value to the student experience (Ellis, Ginns, & Piggott, 2009).

All these strategies are designed within a project plan which has been risk assessed, budgeted for, and incorporated in an integrated change leadership process.

## **Conclusions**

The implementation and maintenance of Curriculum 2012 is a work in progress and will require extensive professional development to ensure consistent application throughout the University. The induction of new staff will address staff competencies in applying the principles and practices of Curriculum 2012 and FYE. ECU has adopted a strategic approach

to Curriculum 2012 which is based on the literature on Higher Education and FYE, as well as the University's vision to provide active learning opportunities designed to graduate knowledgeable, professional and valued citizens who engage critically with, and contribute to, the future and sustainability of their local, national and international communities.

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