

## The capstone principles

Capstones are extraordinarily diverse, but also almost ubiquitously share curricula features that provide students with a distinctive culminating experience. The fundamental characteristics of capstones identified through the Fellowship study fell into six categories, presented below as the principles of capstone design. Across disciplines, programs, cohorts and capstone types, the emphasis on each of these will differ. Nonetheless, the principles provide a guide to the nature and unique importance of the capstone experience in the student journey to graduation and beyond. Great capstones involve:

### 1. Integration and extension of prior learning

Capstones are the culminating achievement of a degree experience, and as such are an integrative event in a student's final year of study. Notwithstanding the fact that the capstone may be run concurrently with other studies, the curriculum should provide the context in which students select and use appropriate knowledge and skills, identify and act on knowledge and skill gaps, and apply the consolidated learning in response to the new challenges they face. In this way, the capstone allows students to meaningfully build on prior experiences and capacities while also gaining critical skills in evaluation of learning needs for a given scenario.

### 2. Authentic and contextualised experiences

Capstones should be authentic to the larger disciplinary and professional contexts to which they are directed, as well as recognising the potential for students' diverse future careers and need for transferable skills. Challenges and activities should reflect those experienced outside of the course context, regardless of whether the capstone is actually situated, operates as a simulation or is a project. This need for authenticity should extend to the assessment also – the criteria and assessment methods should be explicitly focused on student performance within, and the products of work carried out for, the capstone.

### 3. Challenging and complex scenarios

Capstones are typically characterised by challenging or messy problems and scenarios, with multiple interacting parts or stages of development. They may involve the management of multiple stakeholders, teamwork and decision-points, as well as a consideration of the implications and limitations of a single discipline perspective or approach. Operating as a 'safe place' for students to extend and test their capabilities, the experience should challenge students to identify and manage such complexity, although the degree to which they are expected to provide complete solutions to, or navigate all aspects of, these complex scenarios should be in line with the appropriate qualifications framework and level of development.

**4. Student independence and agency**

Capstones provide students with the opportunity to take charge of their learning and, generally, to make decisions about the topics, approaches and/or outcomes with which they will engage, within a framework of expectation. They also provide students with supported opportunities to develop resilience as they reflect and work through false starts and dead ends. By empowering students and engaging them as mature learners, capstones provide the context in which students are able to build confidence and capacity, understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and develop a sense of personal responsibility that will serve them beyond the university experience.

**5. A concern with critical inquiry and creativity**

Staff and students alike should take a questioning attitude towards the scenarios and challenges in the capstone; examining, problematizing, critiquing and considering novel approaches to these as appropriate. This may relate to the discipline, methods, data, and/or the industry, social and cultural context in which students are working, but should include students in a process of continuous evaluation and creative problem solving. Inquiry may take the form of traditional research, or primarily be logical or reflective in nature. Regardless of whether students pursue professional careers or postgraduate study in the period after graduation, these skills and experiences provide solid ground on which to build as effective critical thinkers.

**6. Active dissemination and celebration**

High impact capstones typically include an element of dissemination and celebration that makes visible the significance of their efforts. Public dissemination raises the stakes for students, encourages benchmarking and is highly motivational. Dissemination may be embodied in presentations to clients and peers, as websites or seminar/poster sessions, as performances, or through public celebrations (e.g. awards, exhibitions, launches and so on). Whatever the format, the celebration of achievement sends a clear message to both students and the community that we believe in the quality of our students and their work. It also signals to students at all year levels that the capstone is an aspirational goal and an exciting and challenging culminating achievement in their undergraduate degree experience.

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