



First year curriculum principles: Program coordinator checklist

First year curriculum principle	Checklist questions
<p>1. Transition</p> <p>The curriculum and its delivery should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students' transition <i>from</i> their previous educational experience to the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning. The first year curriculum should be designed to mediate and support transition as a process that occurs over time. In this way, the first year curriculum will enable successful student transition into first year, through first year, into later years and ultimately out into the world of work, professional practice and career attainment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are your cohort's orientation and transition needs coherently and relevantly mapped to crucial time periods (such as: immediately after the main offer round; during O Week; over the first weeks of semester; pre-census; over the course of first year)? • What information is provided to your students during their program orientation? For coordination and consistency, is the extent and nature of this information communicated to first year subject coordinators? • Are there any subject coordinators or other teachers in the first year this semester who are new to first year teaching? How are they to be supported? • Are students provided with the opportunity to self-assess their entry knowledge, skills and attitudes against discipline expectations (e.g. via ePortfolio)? • Is there clear and consistent communication to commencing students regarding expectations and responsibilities, including advice on 'how things work around here'? • Is the information provision about programs, processes and procedures pre-enrolment clear, accurate, consistent, and sufficiently detailed for informed choice and effective action?
<p>2. Diversity</p> <p>The first year curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students. First year curriculum design should recognise that students have special learning needs by reason of their social, cultural and academic transition. Diversity is often a factor that further exacerbates transition difficulties. The first year curriculum should take into account students' backgrounds, needs, experiences and patterns of study and few if any assumptions should be made about existing skills and knowledge. 'Diversity' in this context includes, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • membership of at-risk or equity groups • widening participation (e.g. non-traditional cohorts) • students' existing skills and knowledge • patterns and timing of engagement with the first year curriculum (e.g. mid-year entry). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the diversity characteristics of the entering cohort? Are there any noticeable attrition patterns amongst particular cohorts? Has this information been communicated to first year coordinators and teachers? • Are students clear about where to go to access academic and other support assistance (physically and/or virtually)? Are support pathways clearly and consistently communicated, preferably in a 'just-in-time' and 'just-for-me' way? • Are students provided with the opportunity to self assess and reflect on the diversity of (for example) their learning preference (e.g. VARK)/ personality type (e.g. Myers-Briggs)/ preferred team role (e.g. Belbin)/own cultural 'grab bag' (e.g. cultural competence self assessment)? • Are program documentation and other student communications written in plain English and without the inclusion of administrative and/or discipline jargon (unless just-in-time and explained)? • Is flexibility built in across the curriculum design to ensure greater accessibility by diverse cohorts? • Are new learners exposed to a variety of learning, teaching and assessment methods across the first year curriculum?



3. Design

First year curriculum design and delivery should be student focused, explicit and relevant in providing the foundation and scaffolding necessary for first year learning success. This requires that the curriculum must be designed to assist student development and to support their engagement with learning environments through the intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

- What are the first year curriculum objectives?
- Does the first year curriculum form a coherent, integrated, relevant whole?
- Is there an intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills, and attitudes over the course of the first year to provide the foundation on which later years can build? Is this roadmap of program design made explicit to students?
- How is transition mapped across the first year curriculum? How well does the curriculum scaffold tertiary and discipline learning and also the 'enablers'/processes of that learning within and across first year subjects (and not focus solely or more heavily on the content of that learning)?
- What 'co-curricular' activities are designed-in to support aspects of the formal curriculum?

4. Engagement

Learning, teaching, and assessment approaches in the first year curriculum should enact engaging and involving curriculum pedagogy and should enable active and collaborative learning. Learning communities should be promoted through the embedding in first year curriculum of active and interactive learning opportunities and other opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher–student interaction.

- Does the first year deploy a variety of engaging pedagogies across its subjects (e.g. variation in large/small group split; enactment of a team-based learning approach in a first year subject (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink (2002); www.teambasedlearning.org); model a 'professional conversation' in large first year group (Field & Kift, 2006))?
- What collaborative learning opportunities exist (e.g. well-managed teamwork, team-based learning)? In particular, do opportunities for PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions), SI (Supplemental Instruction), or other peer mentoring opportunities exist?
- What staff-to-students interactions are made available (e.g. expert seminars; staff panels; streamed podcasts/videos; careers nights with staff and alumni; students and alumni sessions; discipline blog; academic mentors appointed for first year)?
- Is specific attention paid to double degree students' engagement in their dual learning communities?
- Do first year students have physical (or virtual) spaces available to them to encourage social interaction and a sense of belonging?
- What are the formal and informal opportunities for you to engage with your first year cohort?



5. Assessment

The first year curriculum should assist students to make a successful transition to assessment in higher education, while assessment should increase in complexity from the first to later years of curriculum design. Critically, students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their program of study to aid their learning and to provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement.

- Is the assessment strategy across the first year coherent and integrated? Is the assessment manageable for both students and staff in terms of workload (e.g. spread of due dates for assessment) and fair for students in terms of equity? Is there a variety of assessment types across the first year?
- How is consistency facilitated in program expectations regarding assessment (e.g. as regards consistent use of criteria and standards; naming of assessment tasks; use of assessment verbs; etc.)?
- Does assessment increase in complexity from the first to later years?
- Is there early, 'low stakes', formative assessment due and returned to students before Week 4–5 to relieve student anxiety, to provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement, and to identify those students in need of extra support?
- How are students encouraged to interpret and act on feedback provided?

6. Evaluation and monitoring

Good first year curriculum design is evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation that leads to curriculum development and renewal designed to improve student learning. The first year curriculum should also have strategies embedded to monitor all students' engagement in their learning and to identify and intervene in a timely way with students at risk of not succeeding or fully achieving desired learning outcomes.

- Have you reviewed the success of the previous semester's orientation program to identify areas for improvement?
- Is there regular monitoring of withdrawal and patterns of attrition? Do data suggest any identifiable cohorts having particular difficulties?
- Is the first year curriculum itself evidence-based and evaluated for improvement using a variety of sources (e.g. using corporate data, sector surveys (AUSSE, CEQ), formal teaching and course evaluations, focus groups, peer review, first year teachers meetings, sessional staff input)?
- Is the feedback loop on evaluations closed with students?
- Are first year teachers made aware of the results of program evaluation and of key areas for improvement and staff development?
- Is there a strategy in place for monitoring for student (dis)engagement (e.g. using and collating a variety of indicators such as taking attendance rolls; knowing students by name; involving peer mentors; monitoring library activity and online interactions (LMS, email activation); noting non-submission of assessment; noting poor performance on early assessment)? Are students identified at-risk by this process subject to support and intervention strategies?