Brief guide for designing a curriculum and constructing a course document

1. Introduction

The Rhodes University Policy on Curriculum Development and Review (http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/about/teachinglearningpolicies/) states that the term 'curriculum' refers to the major elements of teaching and learning which include: disciplinary knowledge; disciplinary ways of knowing; skills and practices; teaching methodologies and assessment practices.

All curricula are informed by the nature of the discipline/field, the philosophical beliefs of the teacher, who the students are and the broader context in which the curriculum is enacted. Curriculum is both the planned process, the actual implementation of the teaching and the students' 'experiences' of the learning process.

Curriculum is used in this brief guide to refer to all levels of curriculum, that is, qualification level (e.g. BA, BSc), subject level (e.g. Psychology), course level (e.g. Developmental Psychology) and module level (e.g. Theories of child development)[1]. There are issues that will need to be considered that are specific to whichever level you are working on but the principles underpinning the levels are the same.

The main purpose of this brief guide is to provide some guidelines for how to go about designing a course or module and for how to document your planned curriculum. It is useful in institutions and departments if there is a more or less standard way of documenting curricula. In section 3 below we offer a curriculum template which can be used as is or adapted for specific disciplinary contexts.

The curriculum is the centre of the academic project and much thought needs to go into designing new curricula and reviewing existing curricula. In the next section, the principles for curriculum articulated in the Rhodes Policy are outlined. These are followed by some of the key questions which you, as an individual course designer or even better, which disciplinary curriculum teams, could use to interrogate existing curricula or take into account when designing new curricula. Thereafter a suggested template for documenting your curriculum plan is provided. This template will help to ensure that national requirements for the registration of higher education qualifications are met.

2. Thinking Work: Principles underpinning curriculum design and review

Design of curricula at all levels should be **responsive** to the discipline / field, to the students' learning needs, and to the social context, taking into account our position as a university in Africa. Curricula should be relevant, up-to-date, and demonstrate awareness of negative apartheid and colonial influences on the disciplinary canon and teaching and assessment approaches in the discipline. A number of lecturers at Rhodes have grappled with how to transform and or decolonise their curricula. Some of their ideas are documented in a set of case studies: Curriculum in the context of transformation: Reframing

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[1] At Rhodes course and module are used differently by different faculties. They are used interchangeably in this guide.

[2] The term knowledge structure refers to how knowledge develops / grows in a discipline. Disciplines in the natural sciences, for example, have a **vertical knowledge structure**. Knowledge builds cumulatively, with earlier knowledge being subsumed and integrated into new developments in the field and there is general agreement in these fields about what makes up the knowledge base of the field. This has implications for the sequencing of knowledge in the curriculum. Students normally need to learn disciplinary knowledge in a particular sequence and need to understand certain foundational knowledge before they can proceed to learn more complex ideas, calculations or procedures.

traditional understandings and practices. It can be downloaded from
http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/resources/publications/ - d.en.90482

In designing curricula, all elements of a course should be **aligned** at macro, meso and micro levels. Curriculum alignment refers to coherence between different levels of curriculum as well as between elements within a curriculum. At the macro level, this means vertical coherence between the purpose of a qualification, qualification exit level outcomes and outcomes for courses and modules. At the meso level, this means horizontal coherence between courses and between modules that make up a course. At a micro level, curriculum alignment refers to internal coherence between course/module elements, that is: purpose of course/module, learning outcomes, teaching methodologies and assessment methods.

Curriculum documentation should include **learning outcomes**. Learning outcomes should make explicit the knowledge and understanding of a discipline/ field as well as cognitive, general and professional practices and skills for each course or programme. These should be in line with the Higher Education Qualifications Sub Framework (HEQSF) requirements and South African Qualifications (SAQA) level descriptors (more on these below). A learning outcome describes what students should be able to do with the knowledge they have acquired by the time they have completed a module, course or programme leading to a qualification. Outcomes are complex and embody knowledge, skills, practices and values/attitudes.

In the curriculum design and review process there should be **consultation with key stakeholders**. Stakeholders should include current and past students, academics, and professional bodies and, where appropriate, employers in both the private and public sector.

Reviewing processes should be part of a curriculum plan in order to accommodate new ideas, knowledge and practices in disciplines / fields. Such changes should also be informed by the legitimate learning needs of particular cohorts of students and take into account the affordances of digital technologies for enhancing learning and teaching

Equity and redress are issues that need to be accommodated in the curriculum. Curricula need to be designed in such a way that they can meet the educational needs of all the students admitted to the University. Ways in which the articulation gap between school and university can be bridged need to be clearly stated

Diversity of the student body and academics calls for curricula which are sensitive to the different backgrounds and outlooks of those engaged in the teaching and learning processes.

3. Questions to interrogate existing curricula and inform curriculum design process

Macro issues
1. **What informs this curriculum?**

- The purposes of higher education
- Institutional vision and mission
- The needs of vocation/profession
- Disciplinary / field knowledge structures[2]
- Staff preferences and expertise
- Historical convention
- The current SA socio-economic-political context
- Teaching and learning theories
- Other

2. **In what way is this curriculum shaped by student needs?**
   - Preparing students for local and/or global contexts
   - The learning needs of underprepared students
   - The learning needs and backgrounds of the diverse student body
   - Progression through the degree to postgraduate study
   - Relevance to students' everyday lives
   - Inducting students into the literacy of specific disciplines and fields
   - Recognition of multilingualism as a resource to enhance teaching and language[3]

Alignment:
1. **Is this course aligned with the overall qualification exit level outcomes e.g. BSc, MA?**

2. **How does this course fit with other courses in the qualification?**

3. **Are the internal elements of the course aligned?**
   - Is there a clear purpose statement for the course? Is the purpose realistic? Does it motivate students to study the course/ explain why the course is important?
   - Are there clear outcomes to guide students' learning and that are aligned with the purpose of the course?
   - Are critical cross field outcomes (see more below) mentioned and are there indications of the way in which students will acquire these attributes?

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[2] The term knowledge structure refers to how knowledge develops / grows in a discipline. Disciplines in the natural sciences, for example, have a **vertical knowledge structure**. Knowledge builds cumulatively, with earlier knowledge being subsumed and integrated into new developments in the field and there is general agreement in these fields about what makes up the knowledge base of the field. This has implications for the sequencing of knowledge in the curriculum. Students normally need to learn disciplinary knowledge in a particular sequence and need to understand certain foundational knowledge before they can proceed to learn more complex ideas, calculations or procedures.

Disciplines in the humanities generally have a **horizontal knowledge structure**. In these fields knowledge builds when a new theory, perspective or paradigm is developed. In most fields, there are multiple theoretical perspectives on the same phenomenon and academics have more freedom to choose what they would like to include or exclude from the curriculum. It is important then to think about the logic that should underpin the selection and sequencing of curriculum material. Examples of sequencing logics include chronological developments in the field; forms of expression; relationships between phenomena, people, places; levels of sophistication and complexity of ideas, and so on.

[3] Refer to the Rhodes University Language Policy: http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/about/teachinglearningpolicies/

- In what way is the teaching of the course aligned with the purpose & outcomes of the course?
- In what way is the assessment of the course aligned to the purpose, outcomes and teaching methods?

Knowledge

1. **What knowledge and skills are needed for students to succeed / meet the purposes of the course?**
   - Are these made explicit and explained to students?
   - Are they realistic?
   - How are they *explicitly* taught to meet the needs of the diverse student body?
   - Has there been carefully consideration of the sequence in which knowledge is introduced to students?
   - Has there been careful consideration of the pace at which knowledge should be introduced in the course?

2. **Have you considered where the knowledge for this course comes from?**
   - Can you include knowledge that comes from the global South?
   - Can you use examples of how knowledge is used in local/African global South contexts?
   - How is this knowledge linked to the histories of different students in your class? How does it validate their lives?

3. **Do you make explicit to your students how knowledge is created in your discipline?**

Knowers

1. **What dispositions and attributes are needed for students to succeed /meet the purpose and outcomes of the course?**
   - Are these made explicit and explained to students?
   - Are they realistic?
   - How are they *explicitly* taught to meet the needs of the diverse student body?
   - Do you signal to students how these dispositions apply beyond the classroom?
   - Does your course enable students to become/ take on the identity of scientists and value science?

Assessment[4]

1. **Is there a clear assessment plan (approaches, methods, criteria), which is aligned to the purpose of the course, the course outcomes and the needs of a diverse student body?**
   - Is there an appropriate balance between assessment *for* learning (formative) and assessment *of* (summative) learning in the course?
   - Does the curriculum/pedagogy adequately prepare students for summative assessment?

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[4] Assessment is what drives how and what students learn. It is therefore crucial that assessment is designed in such a way that the students study the right things, in the right ways and consistently for the duration of the course. See the Rhodes University Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning: http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/about/teachinglearningpolicies/ and Rhodes case studies on assessment which can be downloaded from http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/resources/publications/#d.en.90482%20

- Are assessment criteria made explicit to students?
- Are assessment methods fair and transparent?

Evaluation[5]

1. **Does you course provide sufficient opportunities to allow students a voice in curriculum decisions?**

4. A curriculum template

The template which appears at the end of this brief guide is **not** meant to be prescriptive but as stated earlier it is useful if universities, faculties or at least departments document curriculum plans in similar ways for comparative and record-keeping purposes. This template is not necessarily given to students in this form. It can be revised to provide information to students in a less technical manner. A word-version of the template is available electronically on the CHERTL website http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/resources/briefguides/
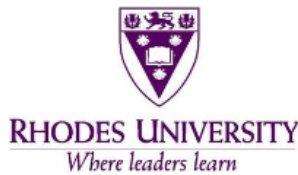
5. Conclusion

The designing and reviewing of qualification, course and module curricula are central to the role of all academics in higher education. This Brief Guide has provided some ideas and questions to get you thinking about your curricula. Where possible, we strongly recommend that you work in curriculum teams in order to ensure coherence across courses and for whole qualifications. The expertise for designing specific disciplinary curricula lies within faculties and departments. However, it is important for those designing curricula to not only be cognisant of developments and changes in their disciplines but also of the broader social, political, cultural and economic context in which teaching takes place. It is also necessary to consider how the curriculum can be structured to meet the legitimate learning needs of our particular students and to prepare them to participate in local and global contexts.

CHERTL staff are available to work with individuals or departments on any aspects of curriculum development and review. Please contact Nomfundo Siqwede on cherlt-admin@ru.ac.za or any other CHERTL staff member.

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[5] See Rhodes Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Course http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/about/teachinglearningpolicies/
and Rhodes case studies on Evaluation which can be downloaded from
http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/resources/publications/#d.en.90482

Course or module title[6]

1. Introduction
1.1 Purpose of module/course

In this section, provide a clear purpose statement for the module which will motivate students and help them to understand why this module is important. You could also provide information regarding how the module fits into the overall degree structure, including pre- and co- requisites.

1.2 HEQSF level and Credit Value

This section can only be completed in consultation with colleagues in a curriculum team. All qualifications are pegged at specific levels on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) (http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/legislation/government-gazette-higher-education-qualifications-sub-framewor-0*).*
For example, B- degrees are pegged at a level 7, honours degrees a level 8, masters degrees at a level 9 and PhD degrees at level 10. The HEQSF specifies minimum credits for qualifications. For example minimum credits for a B-degree are 360. So for example, at Rhodes a BA is worth 360 credits. This means that at first and second year courses have a credit value of 30. Third year courses have a credit value of 60. A semester long first or second year course would thus be worth 15 credits and a semester long third year course 30 credits. It is assumed that the 'average' student would need approximately 10 hours to complete one credit worth of learning. The 10 hours would include contact time, self-study and assessment time. Please check with individual heads of departments and deans as to how the credit system is applied in your Department and Faculty.

1.3 Assumptions of Prior Learning (or Learning assumed to be in place

In this section, you could specify pre-requisite courses / qualifications that students should have done to qualify to enroll for this particular course.

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[6] The text in italics under the headings is intended as a guide for what could be included under each heading. It should be deleted once read.

2. Outcomes

2.1 Specific Intended Outcomes

In this section you need to articulate what it is you hope your students will be able to DO as a result of their engagement with the course materials and processes. Learning outcomes should include knowledge and understanding of a discipline/ field as well as cognitive, general, professional practices and skills as well as values and attitudes. In higher education outcomes are often complex (and can only be achieved over time and by degrees). Where possibly this complexity should be articulated and acknowledged in curriculum planning documentation.

2.2 Critical Cross-Field Outcomes

The Critical Cross-field Training Outcomes (CCFOs) are another mechanism designed to contribute to coherence on the HEQSF. CCFOs describe the qualities which the HEQC identifies for development in students within the education and training system, regardless of the specific area or content of learning i.e. those outcomes that are deemed critical for the development of the capacity for lifelong learning. It is mandatory that at least some of these CCFOs are addressed in all university courses. (http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/pol/2000/curriculum_dev.pdf).

CCFOs are now embedded in the South African Qualifications Authority level descriptors http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/misc/2012/level_descriptors.pdf

You can select from this list of critical cross-field outcomes those outcomes to which you think the course can contribute. It is unlikely that any single course could meet all twelve, as these are expected to be met on completion of a degree/programme. These can either be written as separate outcomes related to your course or can be integrated in the specific intended outcomes (see above).

Students will be able to:

    a) identify and solve problems
    b) work in a team
    c) organize and manage themselves
    d) collect, analyse and evaluate information
    e) communicate effectively
    f) use science and technology
    g) recognize problem solving contexts
    h) reflect on and explore effective learning strategies
    i) participate as a responsible citizen
    j) be culturally and aesthetically sensitive
    k) explore education and career opportunities
    l) develop entrepreneurial opportunities

3. Teaching methods

In this section, you need to provide a clear indication of what teaching and learning methods (pedagogic strategies) you will use to ensure that your students are engaging with the concepts, materials, ideas etc in ways which will enable them to meet the purpose and outcomes of the course. This could include details of how lectures, tutorials, practicals, service-learning etc. will be used in an integrated to way to promote deep approaches to learning (Biggs 2012)[7].

4. Course/ Module content

This section is about making explicit what 'knowledge' your students need in order to achieve the outcomes you have specified. You could provide a list of topics/subject areas to be covered with a brief explanation (one or two sentences) of each. It is important to consider the most appropriate sequence for introducing topics and how much time should be spent on each topic. If a course is broken down into a number of smaller modules, you could indicate the approximate credit value of each module.

5. Resources

List the main texts, text books, key journal articles, teaching notes and any other teaching materials available to students, and which students are expected to access. The list could include library and digital resources and where appropriate, texts from the global South.

6. Assessment of student learning

In this section, you need to outline your overall assessment plan/strategy for the module or course. You need to specify how student learning will be assessed both during the course (formative assessment) and at the end of the course (formative assessment). Included in this plan should be how assessment tasks are linked to learning outcomes, assessment criteria that will be used to assess students' learning and how the range of assessment tasks will be weighted,

It is useful to think of assessment criteria as WHAT you need to see in order to be sure that students can meet the specified outcomes. Assessment tasks refer to HOW the evidence will be collected.

In order to design assessment criteria, it is important to consult the South African Qualifications Authority level descriptors for each of the HEQSF levels. These can be accessed at http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/misc/2012/level_descriptors.pdf [8]

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[7] Biggs, J. (2012). What the student does: teaching for enhanced learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(1): 39-55. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.642839

[8] The purpose of level descriptors for Levels One to Ten of the National Qualifications Framework is to ensure coherence in learning achievement in the allocation of qualifications and part qualifications to particular levels, and to facilitate the assessment of the national and international comparability of qualifications and part qualifications. Ten categories are used in the level descriptors to describe applied competencies across each of the ten levels of the National Qualifications Framework: • Scope of knowledge • Knowledge literacy • Method and procedure • Problem solving • Ethics and professional practice • Accessing, processing and managing information • Producing and communicating of information • Context and systems • Management of learning • Accountability (SAQA 2012 p 3)

The table below may or may not be useful for your purposes.

Specific outcomes 1. 2. 3. 4. Critical Cross-Field Outcomes 1. 2. 3. 4.	Assessment tasks	Assessment criteria

7. Evaluation of module and/or teaching

Here details of the way/s you intend to elicit feedback from your students on the course and on your teaching need to be provided. This section should include details of the way in which feedback data could contribute to an overall evaluation of your course and how you will inform your students of your response to their feedback. This section could also include information on how you intend to ensure that students are given ample opportunities to provide input into future curriculum decision-making. See the Rhodes University Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses
http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/about/teachinglearningpolicies/ and the collection of Rhodes case studies of evaluation practices:
http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/resources/publications/#d.en.90482