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Ensuring sustainable and excellent courses at Curtin by 2010

Beverley Oliver, Sue Jones and Sonia Ferns: March 2010
Executive summary

In March 2007, the Curriculum 2010 Steering Committee endorsed the preliminary documentation for this three-year project. That document described higher education as ‘a highly competitive sector in which excellence is the key to survival and prosperity’. Curriculum 2010 (C2010) was framed as the University-wide implementation of key course-related initiatives, with the explicit aim of ensuring that by 2010 Curtin would offer courses that were sustainable and excellent through the completion of five main tasks. Success through the C2010 project, it was claimed, was likely to result in more consistent standards and practices within and between Curtin’s courses, higher quality student experiences (and better feedback from staff), and staff who would teach less and better. These improvements were seen, in the long term, as leading to a better performance for Curtin in internal, national and international quality measures and ranking systems. The project was far-reaching, complex and challenging.

This document is intended to report on achievements within the C2010, as well as issues and challenges which are ongoing. The achievements are documented here as tangible outcomes (innovations, tools, policies and process) which are now embedded in ‘business as usual’ at Curtin, or are on their way to becoming so. Beyond these ‘tangibles’, there is a sense that there has been a quantum shift in ‘the way we think’ about learning outcomes, graduate attributes, and the aligned curriculum. Evidence of changed thinking is difficult to capture on a ‘whole of university’ scale, and are more properly determined through an external evaluation of the project outcomes. This is likely to be best conducted by a person or persons external to the University.

This report documents 21 outcomes associated with the five tasks in the project. The majority of the 21 outcomes are fully implemented and supported; others are in the early stages of implementation or still in development. In summary, the Curriculum 2010 Project has delivered much in relation to the five tasks, including:

- The attributes of Curtin graduates have been reinforced and further crystallised in the triple-i curriculum.
- Curriculum review processes ensure that the Graduate Attributes and the triple-i curriculum are contextualised, embedded, assessed and evaluated by a range of stakeholders, including students, who can self- and peer-assess their learning in every course using the iPortfolio. The triple-i curriculum foci of industry, global citizenship (Indigenous, international and intercultural) and interdisciplinarity clarify the differentiating characteristics of Curtin courses.
- A Curtin-supported new journal in teaching and learning for graduate employability prompts scholarly reflection and publication on these and related issues.
- Curtin awards now have consistent shape, credit load and length and policies clearly enunciate the standard of achievement expected at each level.
- Assessment policy provides guidance for a consistent student assessment workload, moderation, and timely and constructive feedback.
- These and other aspects of the curriculum can be communicated in unit outlines with a consistent look and feel. Course outlines will follow.
- Closer consultation between those who build spaces and those who use them to teach and learn should lead to more engaged learning, and facilities such as CurtinMobile may assist students new to campus to access information more easily.
- Curtin has a reduced number of courses, streams and units: Undergraduate courses have been reduced 45%; streams by 57%; units by 31%. By January 2010, there were 2225 continuing undergraduate units in the system; Postgraduate courses have been reduced by 37%; streams by 51%; units by 35%. As at January 2010, there were 1680
postgraduate continuing units in the system. There has also been an increase in majors at both levels and this will need careful monitoring.

- Many courses, including very large courses, have been restructured and streamlined. Core curricula and ‘mix and match majors’ are a more prominent feature in the undergraduate landscape, with similar trends emerging in postgraduate courses.
- Financial viability of courses and units is not reducible to an easy formula, but it is clear that low enrolments also mean quality indicators cannot produce reliable results for improvement.
- Comprehensive Course Review is now implemented, and draws on innovative tools and processes such as the Curriculum map, the Needs Analysis and the Graduate Employability Indicators. A total of 116 courses and 66 majors, mostly high-enrolling flagship undergraduate courses, completed Comprehensive Course Review during the C2010 Project, and large courses that were early adopters are showing strong signs of improved quality using student feedback as an indicator.
- A schedule for five-yearly reviews for all courses will be available mid-year after due consultation with Faculties. Annual Course Review has been implemented and refinements are ongoing.
- Scholarship completed within the Project is continuing as outcomes from C2010 are disseminated nationally and internationally through an ALTC Competitive Grant and Teaching Fellowship.

Since C2010 commenced in early 2007, new challenges and emphases have emerged in the sector, particularly a sharper focus on measuring outcomes and standards and widening participation. Drawing on the achievements of C2010 as detailed in this report, the following areas are recommended as a future focus for development and enhancement. Many have been embedded into Curtin’s current Teaching and Learning Enabling Plan:

- Enhancing and sustaining the processes enabling the 360 degree mapping, assessing and evaluating of graduate capability development
- Continuing investment in staff to lead, support and facilitate teaching and learning
- Continuing sustained effort in improving the quality of assessment and feedback to students
- Continuing focus on work-integrated learning
- Continuing vigilance for sustainable courses and units
- Integrate ICT systems enhancing teaching and learning.

Curtin received many commendations for its work in teaching and learning innovation and quality in the 2009 AUQA Audit. Continued reputation for excellence will only be sustained through ongoing investment in teaching and learning, as shown by the positive outcomes brought about through the Curriculum 2010 Project, a joint effort by staff at all levels and in all Faculties of the University.
1. Introduction

In March 2007, the Curriculum 2010 Steering Committee endorsed the preliminary documentation for this three-year project. That document described higher education as ‘a highly competitive sector in which excellence is the key to survival and prosperity’. Curriculum 2010 (C2010) was framed as the University-wide implementation of key course-related initiatives, with the explicit aim of ensuring that by 2010 Curtin would offer courses that were sustainable and excellent through the completion of five main tasks. Success through the C2010 project, it was claimed, was likely to result in more consistent standards and practices within and between Curtin’s courses, higher quality student experiences (and better feedback from staff), and staff who would teach less and better. These improvements were seen, in the long term, as leading to a better performance for Curtin in internal, national and international quality measures and ranking systems. The project was, as predicted in the opening paragraph of the preliminary documentation, far-reaching, complex and challenging. This document is intended to report on achievements within the C2010, as well as issues and challenges which are ongoing. The achievements are documented here as tangible outcomes (innovations, tools, policies and process) which are now embedded in ‘business as usual’ at Curtin, or are on their way to becoming so. Beyond these ‘tangibles’, there is a sense that there has been a quantum shift in ‘the way we think’ about learning outcomes, graduate attributes, and the aligned curriculum. Evidence of changed thinking is difficult to capture on a ‘whole of university’ scale, and are more properly determined through an external evaluation of the project outcomes. This is likely to be best conducted by a person or persons external to the University.
2. Approach and resourcing

Throughout the project, C2010 was communicated as ‘ensuring sustainable and excellent courses at Curtin by 2010’. The approach was based on the following principles for effective change management in universities particularly in relation to buy-in from key stakeholders such as academic teaching staff. Key publications of effective change management in universities, such as those represented by verbatim excerpts below, informed the approach to project management in C2010:

1. Five key conditions for effective dissemination of projects are ‘effective, multi-level leadership and management; a climate of readiness for change; availability of resources; comprehensive systems in institutions and funding bodies; and funding design that demands, encourages and supports risk-taking, change and dissemination (Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers, & Abraham, 2005);

2. Conditions necessary for the adaptation, implementation and embedding of project outcomes [include]: supportive and proactive leadership of teaching and learning; support and advice for adaptation and implementation, including academic development support and advice on intellectual property; perceptions that teaching, teaching innovation and the scholarship of teaching, [are] valued, including through systems of recognition and reward. (McKenzie, Alexander, Harper, & Anderson, 2005)

3. Change capable universities are evidence-based, set priorities, are outcomes-focused and operate in a responsive, collaborative, team-based and focused fashion . . . Never start with the idea of changing culture. Start with the issue faced by the organisation, determine the challenges the existing culture may present, ‘shape and leverage the strength of existing cultures and their leaders’ to facilitate success. For any hope of change in an institution with a long history, it is essential to tap into the existing culture. . . . The relevance of focusing on teaching and learning is that it will ensure an improved course experience for students, retain students to completion, result in better graduates and generate improved research, community engagement and service overall. Universities must embed mechanisms for continual review and improvement through an evidence-based approach which focuses on outcomes and practices (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

Drawing on these sources, the following conditions prevailed during C2010:

- Clear leadership and endorsement from the Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors, and the Pro-Vice Chancellors: Executive leadership endorsed, promoted and reinforced C2010 in a unified way in public fora such as VC’s addresses, VC’s Notes to Staff, Senior Management Conferences and so on from the beginning of the project. This is likely to have been a principal cause for early dissemination within the University, and buy in from teaching staff. The Executive leadership team also sought updates throughout the project in terms of strategic outcomes, funding needs, and offers of support if needed.

- Guaranteed funding: Executive leadership ensured the Project was funded securely from its commencement, even when there were competing strategic needs. Midway through the Project, the Vice-Chancellor declared that the budget for the outcomes of the Project would be operationalised. This meant that ongoing sustainability was likely, and that staff clearly saw executive endorsement of the value of the Project.
• Governance and strategic alignment: The Project was governed by a Steering Group which sought collaborative and consultative endorsement of intended directions and outcomes. The Steering Committee included representatives from all areas of the University, particularly course coordinators and teaching staff, and outcomes were reported through this Steering Committee to University Teaching and Learning Committee (UTLC) and on to Academic Board. C2010 was a Standing Item of UTLC, Courses Committee, and Academic Board for the life of the Project.

• Extrinsic motivation: The fact that the Project tasks were drawn from the then Teaching and Learning Enabling Plan, and that Curtin’s Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Audit occurred in the second year of the Project increased motivation to engage with C2010 and facilitated engagement with the necessity to change practice in many areas related to the quality of teaching and learning.

• Intrinsic motivation: Regardless of external drivers, the key stakeholders—course coordinators and teaching staff—who worked intensely on renewing the curricula of units and courses were one of the main causes of successful outcomes of the Project. Staff were patient with the piloting of new tools and processes, and in the main, deeply committed to improving the quality of the curriculum and the student experience and generous in investing significant time in the curriculum renewal process. Staff also engaged in debate, robustly at times, on the future shape of degrees and majors. Once the debate was had, and decisions were made, teaching staff in the main engaged in the change process with goodwill.

• Collaborative leadership: The leadership within the Project was a joint collaborative team approach, with major decisions based on a consensus approach. This included prime networks with key leaders such as Deans of Teaching and Learning, Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees, and leadership and representation from Student Services, Student Support, Library, eLearning, Curtin IT Services, Properties, Faculty Student Support Officers, Marketing and DMU, International Office, and so on.

• A focus of efficiency and effectiveness: The C2010 mantra, to have sustainable and excellent courses, are based on these two drivers—that rather than offer a myriad of courses and units, we should aim to teach better, and spread ourselves less thinly across unsustainable endeavours.

• Scholarship and evidence: The Project team endeavoured to produce comprehensive and scholarly discussion papers and reports throughout the Project. Suggested change was in response to an identified problem and drawing on a scholarly approach and environmental scan of similar issues within and beyond Australia. This included examination and interrogation of existing indicators (such as eVALUate, Australian Graduate Survey and so on), and where there were gaps in the data, the creation of new indicators (such as the Graduate Employability Indicators).

• Sustainability through policy: Throughout the Project as tools and processes were refined, they were embedded into reviewed or new policies to ensure ongoing monitoring and accountability.

• Communication: Beyond committee documentation, broadcast communications about Project events and developments occurred through emails to staff; a Project website with downloadable templates and exemplars, inclusion in the annual Teaching and Learning book and Graduate Attribute bookmarks bearing the C2010 logo. All reports and documents from the Project also bore the C2010 logo for easy recognition.
• Capacity-building: Perhaps the largest underpinning task of the Project was capacity building for all involved, within and beyond the Project team. In this way, C2010 could be described as a widespread and extensive staff development event in curriculum and unit design for quality teaching and learning. Capacity-building was one of the tasks of the Project team, but there was also a great deal of peer mentoring between staff from all areas of the University, and particularly within and between Faculties.

• A service mentality: Wherever possible, the Project Team used funding to provide administrative support to busy teaching staff—for example, curriculum mapping, an intensely administrative tasks, was performed by the Project Team, and presented to teaching teams for decision-making, revision and renewal. Course changes resulting from the decisions made were supported through Courses Management Office.

• Quality improvement: Wherever possible, internal and external peer review have been sought to inform continuous improvement. This includes dissemination through publications of outcomes in scholarly peer-reviewed fora (usually conference papers for expediency) for dissemination to the wider academic community, nationally and internationally. It also means establishing an internal framework and processes for systemic and systematic quality improvement—all C2010 outcomes will need to be improved and adapted on an ongoing basis.

Project funding was made available mainly through

1. Strategic budget to the Office of Teaching and Learning (approx. $800,000 in 2007; $1.2 million in 2008; $1 million in 2009).

2. One-off budget enhancements to Schools and Faculties in 2007.

3. Areas using existing budget to deliver project outcomes (e.g. Curtin IT Services (CITS) delivered iPortfolio and CurtinMobile within their existing budget in 2009).

4. Countless hours spent by academic teaching staff from all Faculties debating issues, forging new directions, and particularly using the tools and processes to restructure and/or improve courses and units.
3. Outcomes related to the five main tasks

The C2010 project steering committee agreed in March 2007 that five tasks described the deliverables of this project, and incorporated the implementation of the course-related objectives of the Teaching and Learning Enabling Plan. Figure 1 illustrates those five tasks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Curtin Award</th>
<th>Course sustainability</th>
<th>Comprehensive Course Review</th>
<th>Annual Course Review</th>
<th>Course management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revised the Curtin award (educational emphases of a Curtin award, and have courses with consistent shape, structure, standards and policies)</td>
<td>Determined course sustainability: Curtin will have a reduced number of courses: some will be discontinued; some will be restructured and streamlined</td>
<td>Implemented the Comprehensive Course Review process and reviewed all continuing courses to ensure that they fit the new shape, structure and standards, and to ensure that they are high quality</td>
<td>Implemented the Annual Course Review process to report annually on course directions and quality initiatives</td>
<td>Ensured we have up-to-date course data management systems in readiness for the Australian Diploma Supplement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 The five main tasks of the C2010 project

The pages that follow provide details of twenty-one major outcomes related to these five tasks. Many are now fully implemented, and will need continuous monitoring and improvement; some are partially implemented, and some still require substantial work during 2010. Figure 2, overleaf, lists the 21 outcomes relating to the five tasks. The pages that follow provide more detail about each task and its related outcomes.