

Intersection Of Programme Design and Lifelong Learning Journeys: Models, Recognition And Benefits In Online Education

Matt Cornock, University of Leeds.

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Topics: How can we articulate informal, non-formal and formal recognition?

Keywords: programme design, online education, lifelong learning, learning journeys, unbundled education.

Abstract

Drawing on the experience of establishing a fully online portfolio of postgraduate programmes at a research-intensive university in the UK, this presentation discusses the strategic thinking and design-led approaches to support wider recognition of prior learning across both formal and informal settings. A model of programme design will be discussed that acknowledges and aligns to the broader educational context of learners, with an emphasis on facilitating a range of learning journeys through reuse and repurpose. It is argued that recognition of informal and formal learning requires a design-led approach that balances effective programme design within a broader educational context of lifelong learning, by scaffolding extra-programme learning journeys.

Established programme design methods focus on the relationship between programme level learning outcomes, teaching and learning at module level, and activities and assessments aligned to module outcomes (Sharpe & Armellini, 2020). This is a highly internal view of programme design, not explicitly connecting outcomes to a wider and often individualised learning context of students. Further, informing programme design is a set of prerequisites, typically academic qualifications or professional experience. This leads to expectations of students' backgrounds, and their pre-existing skills and knowledge brought into the programme of study. However, within a knowledge economy context, shifting careers and an increasing need for adaptability by higher education to address employment skills gaps (Brown et al., 2023), it can be argued that traditional perspectives that place degree programmes at the pinnacle of the educational journey are increasingly out of date. This broader context has led to the value of short courses and microcredentials addressing national skills agendas and brings inclusivity and flexibility to respond to a changing employment environment (van der Hijden & Martin, 2023; Oliver, 2019). There is therefore an opportunity to be explicit in the design of degree programmes to be more responsive to a range of learner needs and backgrounds, align and recognise learning before and after academic study, and connect learning beyond the programme structure.

This presentation will explore how purposeful educational design for unbundling of course content (Morris et al., 2020), structuring programmes for learner flexibility and an activity-led pedagogical approach, recognises and enables extra-programme learning experiences. Models include: performance based admission through completion of foundation modules; access to open content developed from programme materials; programme pedagogy that emphasises application and reflection; stackable programmes through industry-aligned microcredentials.

From our initial work, there are noticeable benefits in approaching online degree programme design to enable a holistic learner journey. First, operational benefits arise from efficient use of academic time to develop core subject matter materials that can be repurposed or co-taught across a variety of course experiences. Second, pedagogical benefits exist in the deliberate interconnection between course types, for example where core subject matter is made available open access prior to study in academic programmes. This brings affordances of revisiting base subject matter, but also incremental layering of the level of critical thinking, interaction with educators and students and application of learning. Finally, in the design of learning across a range of online course types, learners are able to access course experiences that bridge 'just in time' and 'just in case' learning, in a highly personalised journey (Wheeler, 2019, p.91). This ensures immediate learning goals are met, alongside the transformative and anticipatory learning for individuals' development goals yet to be defined (Cornock, 2023).

In essence, a degree programme is not the end goal of an individuals' learning journey and neither is it the beginning. By aligning programme design with a holistic view of learning journeys before and after formal study, educational institutions can develop recognised lifelong learning pathways that support learners to progress and sustain their engagement with learning for longer.

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