A two-stranded whole-of-course approach to postgraduate education

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Whole-of-course approaches have emerged as an important topic in the contemporary outcomes-based education environment. While research-informed accounts of whole-of-course approaches exist, most take undergraduate education as the default. Few examples feature postgraduate education where students seek career enhancement rather than entry. Employing case study methodology, this paper discusses an innovative whole-of-course approach taken in the design and delivery of an Australian postgraduate education course. What marks it as innovative, is that the whole-of-course approach consists of two interrelated strands: One follows a (more familiar) whole-of-course practice of scaffolding graduate attributes, course and subject learning outcomes and is primarily driven by university interests and academics. A second whole-of-course *process* works alongside the first but is driven by postgraduates' professional practice and career goals. The paper concludes by suggesting a whole-of-course approach to design combined with a whole-of-course student process can reconcile postgraduates' learning needs with the interests of the university.

Keywords: whole-of-course approach; postgraduate education; capabilities; employability; demonstrating learning; personalised learning

Introduction

Whole-of-course approaches have become routine in the design of courses (or programs) in higher education (Ferns & Comfort, 2014; Lake & Holt, 2019; van der Vleuten, 2016) and are most commonly associated with outcomes-based education (Tam, 2011). Outcomes-based education gives importance to broadly defined university-wide outcomes, along with contextualised course (or program) and subject (or unit) learning outcomes (Alexander, Cutrupi, & Smout, 2019; Lawson, 2015). A whole-of-course design maps intended learning outcomes across the various subjects that constitute a course (Lake & Holt, 2019; van der Vleuten, 2016). With outcomes mapped, learning activities ensure the outcomes are taught, developed, and assessed in both low and high-stake tasks, and at multiple points, throughout the course (Biggs,

2012; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). In turn, this ensures institutional employability agendas are actioned (Alexander et al., 2019; Crisp, Higgs, & Letts, 2019) and graduates have the skills and knowledge necessary for entry into their chosen field of practice.

However, outcomes-based education is not without critique. Some argue it can lead to a 'state of dependency' (Bagnall, 1994, p. 30) where decisions are made *for* students and not *by* them. For instance, students are rarely involved in the development of the learning outcomes they are expected to achieve. Rather, this responsibility is largely the remit of high-level stakeholder committees, advisory boards, academics, and sometimes in conjunction with industry. Other critiques see outcomes-based education in conflict with the complex world in which graduates must practice (Barnett, 2006).

These issues can be intensified in some postgraduate courses where students with established careers are seeking career enhancement rather than entry (Ho & Kember, 2018; Ho, Kember, & Hong, 2010). Work becomes more complex as careers advance (OECD, 2022; Oerther & Oerther, 2021), and postgraduates may perceive institutionally developed outcomes to be unrelated to their own complex career goals (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). To this end, teachers are advised to 'communicate intended outcomes and explain their importance repeatedly throughout the course' (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018, p. 833). While this suggestion may address concerns with the relatability of learning outcomes, it retains the dependency issue raised by Bagnall (1994). It is not suggested that students *develop* formal learning outcomes beyond invited contributions to stakeholder groups. However, students *can* assume responsibility for considering and articulating the relevance of formal learning outcomes in relation to their own learning needs.

This paper presents a qualitative case study where it is students (and not teachers) that repeatedly consider and articulate the importance of course and subject learning outcomes. The case involves an Australian postgraduate course featuring a whole-of-course *process* that was inspired by the early work of John Stephenson (1992, 2001). The Capability Wrap *process* works in conjunction with the more familiar whole-of-course design. The later accommodates university goals (or outcomes), while the former accommodates postgraduates' career goals and learning needs. This two-stranded whole-of-course approach reconciles the learners' professional needs with the interests of the university and enables graduates to 'proactively develop, adapt and

repackage their capabilities' (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018, p. 45) in meaningful ways.

This paper's contribution is threefold. First, it contributes to emerging discussions of whole-of-course approaches in higher education (Lake & Holt, 2019; van der Vleuten et al., 2012) through its illustration of a unique whole-of-course approach. Second, it addresses identified gaps with its specific focus on postgraduate education (Coneyworth, Jessop, Madden, & White, 2020; Ho et al., 2010; Marvell, 2022). Third, it addresses calls to action as result of postgraduates' dissatisfaction with coursework's ability to deliver employability outcomes (Cook et al., 2021; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018).

After outlining some distinctive features postgraduates and their learning beyond the university, the paper introduces John Stephenson's model for a *Capability Envelope* (1992, 2001) that inspired the design of whole-of-course Capability Wrap process central to the case. Next, background of the course and methods are discussed before data illustrates the process in action at both subject and course level. This involves three stages of the process where students iteratively; review formal learning outcomes and their own learning goals; reflect on their learning and make judgements; and then demonstrate their learning to themselves and to others. These stages are discussed in sequence and reveal how students are afforded agency in their learning and ultimately how this bolsters postgraduate employability.

Postgraduates and learning

A taught postgraduate qualification can improve graduates' employment chances (Griffith & Guthrie, 2008), salary and for some enhanced social mobility (Marvell, 2022; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). Yet 'postgraduate education as a field is badly neglected' (Goodyear, 2021, p. 240). This is an issue for whole-of-course research and higher education research more broadly because postgraduates' experiences can differ from their undergraduate counterparts (Coneyworth et al., 2020; Ho, Kember, & Hong, 2012; Marvell, 2022).

While most undergraduate enrolments are motivated by a future where they will *enter* a particular field of practice, among the increasing numbers of postgraduate enrolments (OECD, 2022; Palmer, Abrahams, Pace, & De Rango, 2018) are those seeking to *enhance* an established career. For some this means gaining advanced

knowledge in their field (Ho et al., 2010) and for others it means taking a career in new directions (Ho et al., 2010; Oerther & Oerther, 2021): For instance, taking on leadership/managerial roles or new duties that utilise existing expertise in the facilitation of learning for newcomers to their field or in organisations more broadly (OECD, 2022; Rocco, Smith, Mizzi, Merriweather, & Hawley, 2020). This may explain why business and education courses combined account for the majority of Australian postgraduate enrolments (Palmer et al., 2018). Considering the possible range of experienced professionals who seek career enhancement in this way points to diverse postgraduate cohorts with complex learning needs (Lyons et al., 2022).

Postgraduates also face common challenges that impact how they experience courses (Marvell, 2022). Many part-time postgraduates 'are juggling employment and families while trying to continue their education' (Gouthro, 2019, p. 67). This can mean time-poor students are 'unlikely to tolerate patronising educational processes' and this can lead to 'demands for more authentic learning that helps them fulfil their pursuits in the world' (Boud & Rooney, 2015, p. 198).

Postgraduates are not a *tabula rasa* when it comes to learning either. Given many are already skilled professionals they can be subject to professional body requirements to engage in professional learning on a regular basis. It is also pertinent to consider the learning they are likely involved in through the everyday exigencies of work. A considerable volume of workplace learning research shows how responding to the challenges of everyday work involves learning (Billett, 2011; Boud & Middleton, 2003). It shows that when faced with a workplace challenge, workers identify what needs to be learned, develop strategies for learning it and then ask 'is this good enough to meet the requirements of this kind of work' (Boud & Rooney, 2015, p. 206). In all, this means postgraduates can already:

- be engaged in professional and workplace learning (Goller & Paloniemi, 2022).
- have experience identifying learning goals, seeking out activities to learn what is required, evaluating their learning, and demonstrating that what they learn to others (Boud & Rooney, 2015; Lemmetty & Collin, 2020).

The prospect of postgraduates having these experiences raises questions about how outcomes-based education and course design might accommodate them. In this paper a capability approach is put forward as one way this may be achieved.

Stephenson's capability approach

Professional capabilities

Stephenson's (1992) early work emerged around the same time as universities were adopting outcomes-focused education. In it, he argues that a higher education should give 'students the confidence and ability to take responsibility for their own continuing personal and professional development' (p. 1). This idea endures in contemporary higher education where lifelong learning is commonly championed along with the concept of capabilities (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). Like Stephenson, some still call for dispositional capabilities; e.g. *deliberate professionals* (Trede & McEwen, 2016) or *ethical* and *moral* professionals (Berti, Jarvis, Nikolova, & Pitsis, 2021). These transcend myopic visions of what graduates know and can do: speaking instead to what graduates can do in the future, as well as *how/why* they do it. A common strand among these voices, whether implied or explicit, is the importance of being a reflective professional who can 'recognise and resist unreflected[sic] conformity' (Trede & McEwen, 2016, p. 8). That is, professionals that act in the current world as well as reflect on their actions and shape 'what next' (Haberberger, 2018).

Stephenson's reflective model (Capability Envelope)

Historically, reflection has been at the heart of many education efforts (Boud, 2010; Brookfield, 2017; Dewey, 1900; Schön, 1983), and this is something that Stephenson (2001) incorporates into a *Capability Envelope* model. The model provides 'a structure of support to enable people to relate their work-based problem-oriented learning to their own longer-term goals and development' (Stephenson, 2001, p. 94). The Capability Envelope is as much about process as it is about what is produced and consists of three interrelated stages that can be repeated over one's career (Stephenson, 2001, p.95).

1. *Exploration*: worker/learners reflect on prior learning, set learning goals, and plan for future learning.
2. *Progress review:* worker/learners reflect in their learning and judge their progress against goals.
3. *Demonstration*: worker/learners articulate their achievements and personal learning and evidence ongoing professional learning to others

The Capability Envelope was intended for people in work settings who could encompass 'individual learning activities within an overall learning strategy, which reconciles the learners' needs with interests of the organization[sic]' (Stephenson, 2001,

p. 86). The replacement of *organisation* with *higher education* in this quote hints at a similar reconciliation in the postgraduate course design and the Capability Wrap process presented below.

Background

The course

The case involves an Australian Master of Education that embodies a whole-of-course design. Along with the institutions mandated graduate attributes (Alexander et al., 2019), the Course Learning Outcomes and subsequent Subject Learning Outcomes contextualise three themes (learning, leading and innovation/research). The whole-of-course approach extends to mapping forms of assessment and a Capability Wrap process.

Methods

Like many case studies, this one is 'eclectic in the types of data that are used' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 299). Data was collected via various methods between 2018-2023. The initial purpose of collecting data was primarily concerned with ongoing course and subject evaluation/redevelopment. However, ethics approval is granted by the University of Technology Sydney for its use here (e.g. ETH16-0542; ETH18-2856; ETH22-7311). Methods for gathering the qualitative data include:

- Three focus groups of between 8-12 students (2018, 2022, 2023)
- Two subjects' Student Satisfaction Surveys (SFS) (2017-2023)
- A scoping survey of graduates (*n*16) (2018)
- Seven student interviews (2022, 2023)
- Exerts of student work (used with permission)
- Publicly available course documents

Participants are current or former students of the course and are deidentified with only (bracketed) sources of data revealed when direct participant quotes are used.

The students

Having professional experience is a pre-requisite for enrolment, and almost all students continue working full-time in course-related roles. The variety of students' current

employment range from Teachers, Learning Consultants, Coaches and Deans to Nurse Educators, Defence Trainers, Learning Designers and Clerics. In addition to exemplifying a diverse range of undergraduate qualifications, the range of employment roles above exemplify how a Master of Education can 'prepare people for different career paths' (OECD, 2022). Most are established in their field of practice and aspire to enhance their career by seeking new roles or higher duties. Periods since students' previous university study varies from between five to thirty years.

The Capability Wrap process in action

In anticipation of a diverse cohort of postgraduate seeking to enhance their established careers, Stephenson's (2001) Capability Envelope was adapted and renamed as the Capability Wrap process. The process retains the tenets and stages of Stephenson's capability envelope and works alongside whole-of-course and subject design. This section illustrates the Capability Wrap process in action and is organised around three stages: exploring, reviewing/reflecting, and demonstrating learning. Stages are described, illustrated, and discussed sequentially at course and subject level.

Exploring

Stephenson argues that 'students need to develop clarity of purpose, to communicate those purposes, [and] to express their purposes as learning goals' (1992, p. 5). This was a first stage in his original model (2001) and is also the first stage of the Capability Wrap process.

Exploring: Course Learning Plans

Students begin the Capability Wrap process by establishing a Course Learning Plan (CLP). This involves them reflecting on their professional contexts and learning, articulating career/professional goals for the course as well as aligning their goal/s with one or more Course Learning Outcomes. By way of example, one student's career goal was to 'develop in-depth knowledge and skills to provide innovative solutions to the organisation whilst maximising the use of technology' (Student Work). Importantly, the student aligns the goal to their employment in an organisational learning role as well as to a Course Learning Outcome to 'demonstrate a critical understanding and capacity to use technologies for learning and leading' (Student Work/Student Handbook).

This brief example illustrates how in identifying their own goals for the course students are brought in direct contact with formal learning outcomes. While these have been contextualised by academics via the course design, here students contextualise them further in the context of their current workplace. The course plan serves as an ongoing reminder to students of what they want to achieve in their current/future, careers. To ensure students engage with the process, they submit the course plan (and Subject Plans– expanded below) via a formative portfolio. It is common for students' course goals to change over the duration of the course, and so they are also encouraged to revise their course goals on a regular basis.

Exploring: Subject Learning Plans

Students also create a Subject Learning Plan which involves them considering the Subject Learning Outcomes and then identifying subject goals of their own. Continuing with the student example above, in a subject that includes a Subject Learning Outcome to 'critically evaluate a range of digital pedagogies and digital technologies for learning' (Student Handbook), the same student's subject goal is to 'develop ability to use the different technologies to engage a diverse workforce in learning', which she explains helps her to work toward achieving her course goal of 'maximising the use of technology' (Student Work). These further contextualised subject goals are added to their formative portfolio. Perhaps not incidentally, the formative portfolios provide teachers opportunities to gain insights into students' needs which can help them to shape the delivery of the subjects they teach.

Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver (2018) found institutional learning outcomes to be too generic to be meaningful for students and suggested that students must engage with them if they are to become meaningful. In the example of goal setting above, the student directly engages with institutional course and subject learning outcomes. While the differences between formal outcomes and the student's own goals may seem minimal, this example illustrates how the student has rendered what they are about to learn as meaningful and authentic. Such rendering is frequently seen in student comments. Including the students below:

> [It] has made each subject feel tailored to my own personal learning needs and has tuned me into the specifics of each subject learning objective […] that I otherwise may not have paid too much attention to (Survey).

> I think this action can teach me how to really reflect on why I'm doing [the subject because] sometimes it's not clear why you're doing certain subjects in a course (Focus Group).

> The course has been, for me, a lengthy exercise in self-exploration, self-reflection, and self-directed learning. The subject learning outcomes that frame each [subject] are designed so that the learner is required to review their own course learning objectives and how the content of the [subject] being embarked upon will contribute to those objectives. This provides a rare opportunity to consider how the intended learning outcomes of the [subject] can be linked to overall course objectives and more immediately, how the intended learnings of the [subject] can be applied to my professional context (Survey).

Evidence of rendering learning authentic is further evident in frequent student comments about how 'subjects link to [their] current practice' and how they 'will be using/applying the learning' (Survey). Despite students all doing the same subjects, students describe how setting goals provides an 'obvious and clear' (SFS) process to personalise what they will learn 'by allowing [them] to drive learning in ways that are unique to [their] context' (Survey).

In addition to rendering learning authentic, students are 'setting the scene' for learning (Biggs, 2003, p. 34). This is important because how students approach their learning has consequences. Rather than students seeing learning and the assessment artefacts they produce as a means to satisfy external expectations (Boud & Walker, 1993), students approach learning with greater intent to learn because they have established relevance for themselves. Furthermore, seeing relevance in what they learn can alleviate theory/practice binaries that are often reviled or resisted by students (Gouthro, 2019) and instead encourage them to approach the learning of theoretical concepts more openly.

Reviewing/Reflecting

Stephenson argues that when students have clear goals they also have 'opportunity to judge their progress [that] they are making towards the achievement of those goals' (1992, p. 5). Like Stephenson's model (2001), reviewing learning and reflection is

embedded in the Capability Wrap process. While students have reflected on their professional context and experiences to develop learning goals, further reflection occurs at subject and course levels.

Reviewing/Reflecting: Subject level

Students 'wrap up' each subject by producing a brief reflection of what they have learned in the subject and assess if (and if so, how well) their goals were achieved. Reflections are added to their formative portfolio. Students repeat setting goals at the beginning, and then reflect on their progress at end, of every subject. Students report a strength of this repetition as that they 'see [their] own journey of learning and how [they're] customising that learning to [their] professional context' (Focus Group). Other students also describe how the ongoing reflections in their formative portfolios benefit them:

> The portfolio really helped me sort of contextualise all of that learning to what I was doing in my profession. It's been a really good way, to sort of combine, the two so it really has given that sort of that that beautiful scaffolding so I can build and build and build and build (Focus Group).

Reviewing/Reflecting: Course level

Given portfolios can include up to eleven subject reflections by the time students begin the Capstone subject, the formative portfolio provides a helpful starting point for course level reflection. Reflection on the contents of formative portfolios aids the development of a summative portfolio and capability statement (expanded below):

> It's important to take in all the individual subjects that we've done and how we've used all of that information between the different subjects

> You can definitely look back and it is quite important because you study in like in a very short period of time [and in other courses] you can forget what you've actually studied (Focus Group).

Students report how reflection aids identifying capabilities developed as result of their studies as well as prompts them to "really think have [they] achieved [their] goals" (Focus Group). This confirms Stephenson's point about how having set goals, the

students are able to judge their progress (1992). Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson, and Pandaero (2017) make a related point about evaluative judgement and how this first requires contextualised understanding what constitutes quality before applying this understanding to what is learned. While assessment against formal criteria occurs necessarily occurs, the students are afforded agency in making contextualised judgements about their learning by applying understandings of what constitutes quality in their workplaces. In short, the students are developing capacity for making evaluative judgements beyond the university and this too is seen as an important goal for higher education (Tai et al., 2017).

Demonstrating Learning

Finally, Stephenson's demonstration stage (2001) also occurs at both course and subject levels. He argues that 'students must be able to communicate what they have learned and the extent to which they have achieved their goals' (1992, p. 5). While reflection is the linchpin for making judgement about the progress, the use of both a summative and formative portfolio provides a mechanism for students to demonstrate their progress to various audiences (Ajjawi & Boud, 2023; Clarke & Boud, 2018).

Demonstrating subject learning: formative portfolio

As students move from one subject to the next their formative portfolio expands through the iterative process of identifying subject learning goals and reflecting on their learning. Students comment on how reflection helps them to notice/articulate what they have learned in individual subjects as well as 'tie together concepts developed across multiple subjects' (Focus Group) or, as another commented, 'enables an accumulation of understanding' (Focus Group). As such, the formative portfolio acts as a document students describe as 'reflecting a journey' (Focus Group) that demonstrates what has been learned to students and teachers alike. Reflection is not only about looking back, for many it also involved looking forward: e.g. 'you know that beautiful process - look back and also look forward' (Focus Group). Another added how in the beginning of the course*:*

> You don't really know where the journey is going to take you, and you actually get to the end and reflect and go well not only have I learned something, but I

have learned to do something - and here is where I now am, and where I see myself potentially going in the future (Focus Group).

Demonstrating course learning: summative portfolio and capability statement
A final component of the Capability Wrap process is for students to produce a Capability Statement (housed in a summative portfolio) that demonstrates their learning to audiences beyond the university. The Capability Statement prompts students to synthesise and repackage their course-wide learning into capabilities of relevance to their professional practice and career aspirations. Despite all students completing the same coursework, the statements illustrate how students from different professions have personalised their trajectories through the course in ways that address their specific contexts and career goals. This is best illustrated by the capabilities that various students use: e.g., some align theirs to leadership frameworks in commercial business sectors; others to high level teaching standards; and, others still modify the formal course learning outcomes to align with health, NGO, higher education or vocational training settings.

While students will graduate with the same awards and testamurs, this does little to distinguish them from others in competitive labour markets (Ajjawi & Boud, 2023; Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, & Johnson, 2019). The production of a capability statement addresses a need to demonstrate 'the distinctiveness of what students can do' (Ajjawi & Boud, 2023, p. np) and this has further consequences for employability. Cook et al. (2021) define employability as 'institutionally driven activities and individual capabilities that culminate in heightened probability of being employed and self-managing future career trajectories' (p.150). This final stage of the whole-of-course process suggests a bolstering of the probability that students are self-managing their careers.

For some, a future trajectory is about doing what they currently do but in new ways or, as one student put it, the course and its process has 'boosted my confidence immensely in carrying out roles' (Survey). However, opportunities for enhancing or shifting careers are opened for others. The survey revealed that most students made career changes while enrolled in the cours. This included a student who explained how the course had 'given [them] greater confidence in applying for leadership roles' (Survey). Another spoke about how engaging with students from other professional contexts made them 'think about different career paths'

(Interview), and another commented how it 'highlighted the transferable nature of [their] skills' and encouraged them 'to consider roles that [they] would not have done previously (SFS). Some commented on how the contextualised coursework was an 'enabler' (survey) for new positions or how they used 'all those capabilities […] from the portfolio' (Focus Group) in their job interview. Others spoke about how the summative portfolio was 'directly responsible for what [they were] able to present as part of the interview and […] a key part of getting a new role' (Survey).

In Australia, as elsewhere, publicly funded higher education institutions are held accountable for graduate employability (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2021), and so the need to deliver on employability is intensified (Crisp et al., 2019). Metrics that matter are generally about whether graduates are employed (or not). However, this final stage of the whole-of-course process provides evidence of how established postgraduate careers are being enhanced too.

The process holds one final employment related benefit. That is, it provides a structure for professionals to engage in ongoing workplace and professional learning and reflect on their practice beyond formal study. As one student noticed:

> It's quite easy to just keep on doing the same thing, and same thing, and same thing, and not think about it. So, I think [the process] is a good pattern to get into (Focus group).

Ironically, this final student comment suggests the Capability Wrap process has potential to revert to Stephenson's (2001) original vision of a *capability envelope* on graduation: thus the process holds potential for graduates to be lifelong learners (regardless of whether educational institutions are involved or not).

Concluding remarks

This paper began with the aim of a threefold contribution. A first was to contribute to emerging discussions of whole-of-course approaches in higher education. The case study in the paper provides a unique example of a two-stranded whole-of-course approach. One strand, involving formal learning outcomes was coupled with whole-of-course process. Together the paper illustrated affordances for students to give formal learning outcomes greater prominence by aligning them with their own career goals. In

doing so, the process circumvented the 'state of dependency' that Bagnall forewarned (1994, p. 30). With its focus on a postgraduate course, the paper also addresses its second aim to contribute to persistent gaps in research of postgraduate education. Despite its reliance on students' employment in related roles, there may be scope for adaptations of the process that make it applicable to undergraduate courses. Finally, a third contribution to graduate employability was proposed. To this end, the two-stranded whole-of-course approach holds much promise for meaningful postgraduate employability outcomes and provides an empirical example of how this might be achieved. Again, aspects of the approach may hold scope for undergraduate adaption.

In hindsight, the case study could be better served by having an intended research publication as the original purpose for data collection. However, like the students' goals, the author's goal shifted from evaluation to research and associated limitations are noted in the data collected. That said, the findings do confirm the utility of adapting Stephenson's ideas and in doing so invites more targeted research.

By way of wrapping up, the two-stranded whole-of-course approach discussed throughout the paper holds applicability for courses with similarly diverse cohorts, or where student engagement with learning outcomes and/or bolstered employability outcomes are sought. While the finding might not be exclusively so, they are especially important for professional education that seeks to help graduates practice in an ever-evolving world – and offers a viable alternative to what Stephenson suggests are "[t]eacher dominated courses [that] prepare inactive and passive learners for predictable situations" (Stephenson, 1992, p. 3).

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