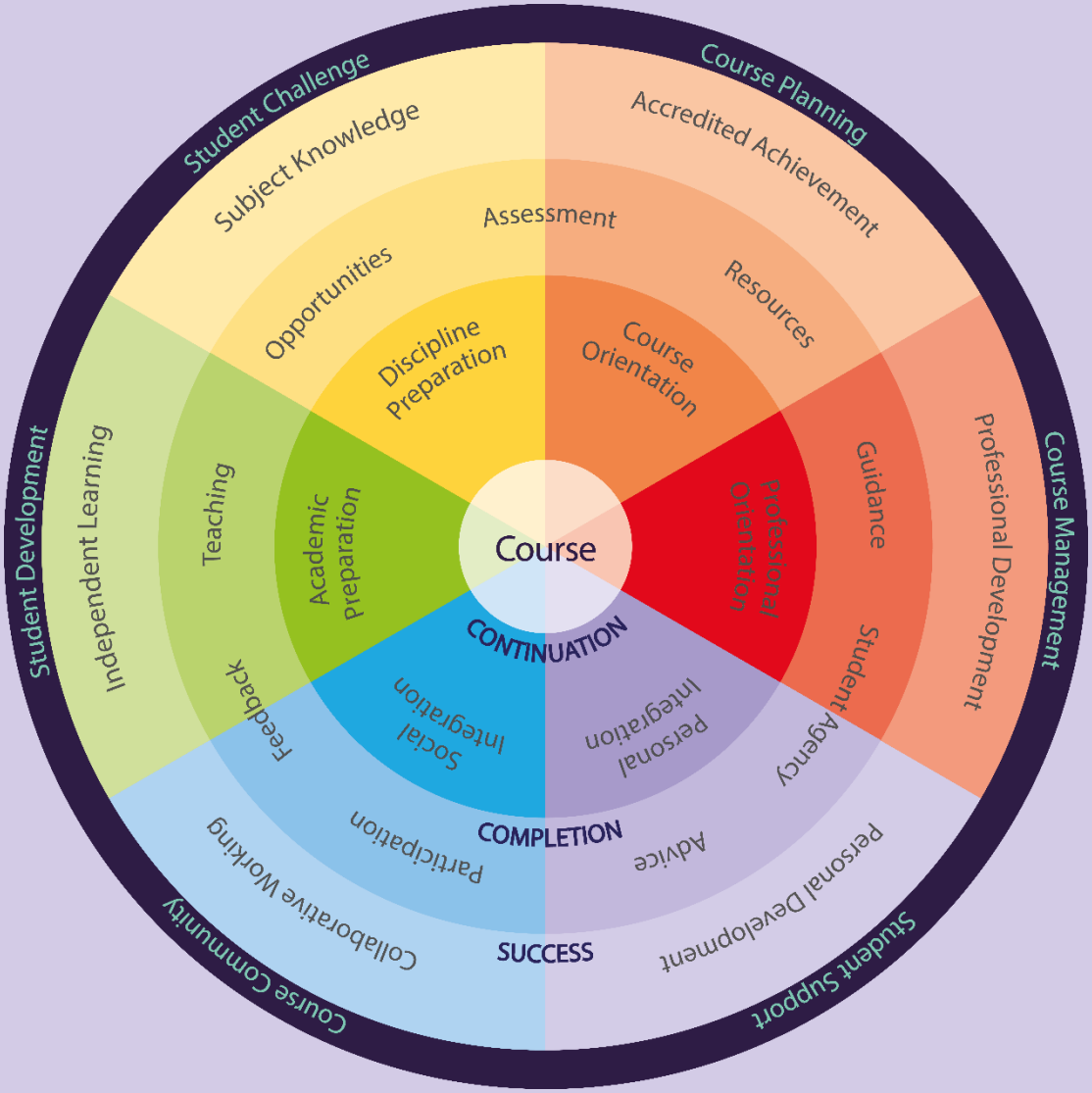
A Guide to Student Continuation, Completion and Success

Course Principles

Centre for Learning and Teaching



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LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

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A Guide to Student Continuation, Completion and Success: Course Principles

The Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT), Leeds Beckett University

Preface

UK HE faces significant financial challenges alongside rapid technological developments and increasing regulation of student continuation, completion and success. Our long-term sustainability depends on continuing to assure the integrity of our academic awards, whilst at the same time being able to reduce costs and develop more impactful approaches to learning and teaching (L&T).

This year, we have seen rapid developments in Generative AI which threaten our traditional academic practices. At the same time, new policies including those relating to academic freedom, free speech and managed boundaries are invariably impacting on learning and teaching.

This guide will help Schools make decisions about what to prioritise. The decisions we make over the next few years about our courses, what and how we teach, and what and how we assess will have significant implications for the quality of student outcomes. These decisions also have long-reaching implications for student and staff experiences.

This guide directly challenges current practice. Colleagues may be uneasy about stopping long-established L&T practices. Learning and Teaching is complex, and change is not without risk. The questions the guide poses may seem overwhelming. This guide is not advocating that we do more – we cannot do more with less. To be able to adopt more impactful practices we need to ask, 'What can we stop doing?' To be more impactful with reduced resources, we need to work differently and think differently about L&T. This guide is designed as a practical resource to support course teams to reflect on practice, identify activities that make the biggest difference to student continuation, completion and success, consider what they could stop doing, and increase L&T effectiveness.

CLT works with course teams, and alongside academic and professional services, to develop areas of practice aligned with the course principles identified in this guide. These principles are research informed. But our greatest asset is the knowledge and experience of our colleagues who work with a constantly changing student demographic and L&T context. CLT welcomes feedback on this guide and on the challenges that course teams are facing. We are at our best when we work together developing and implementing new approaches to L&T.

Professor Ruth Pickford, Director of CLT, Leeds Beckett University (July 2025)

Introduction

CLT's approach to course design is guided by six principles. This document briefly outlines each principle and provides sets of questions to aid reflection. The principles are connected, and questions overlap in places. Whilst the sets of questions may be used together, this guide has been structured to support colleagues' reflection around particular aspects of their academic practice. Scholars of assessment, learning and teaching wishing to further explore these principles will find the related Talis reading lists useful. CLT has a broad range of case studies and resources aligned with these principles. If you would like support in bringing about changes to your course design, please contact CLT (clt@leedsbeckett.ac.uk).

The Course Principle

Our purpose is to support students to learn and to reliably assess students' attainment on their course.

This is best achieved by:

Principle 1

Student Agency: A course should be designed to empower students. Students are the principal agents of their engagement, learning and success.

Principle 2

Inclusive Learning: A course should provide accessible learning opportunities for all. Every student must have an opportunity to succeed.

Principle 3

Valid Assessment: Each course should have an assessment strategy that clearly justifies what is to be assessed, how and when. A student's performance on their course must be purposefully, reliably, and fairly assessed.

Principle 4

Effective Teaching and Feedback: A course's teaching and feedback should be designed together to actively support learning. Learning is a process of iterative improvement.

Principle 5

Course Identity: A course should be an identifiable entity, studied by an identifiable cohort of students, and facilitated by an identifiable team. Student engagement is supported through a sense of mattering and belonging to a course community.

Principle 6

Course Coherence: A course should be designed as a unified whole.

A course's learning outcomes, learning opportunities, assessment and support must be aligned, planned and managed together to maximise student continuation, completion, and success.

1. Student Agency

A course should be designed to empower students because students are the principal agents of their engagement, learning and success.

Many factors beyond our control can impact on a student's engagement, learning and success. We can best empower students to navigate their course and to overcome barriers by providing structures, advice, guidance, flexibility, and resources to enable them to take control of *how* they balance their studies alongside other demands.

Notions of educational or learning gain, whether this relates to a student's knowledge, skills, personal development or work-readiness, illustrate that each student needs to determine *what* they gain from their educational experience.

Recognising that *how* a student engages and *what* a student learns are best determined by the student, we need to empower every student from the start of their course to orientate themselves, to prepare for the academic and disciplinary demands of the course, and to integrate personally and socially into their course community. As a student progresses through their course, they should be supported to effectively exert their agency and make choices that are right for them.

Reflective questions for course teams

To what extent do students on the course have agency?

1. What influence, if any, does an individual student have in relation to their **study** approaches, pace of study, or timetable? Is there flexibility in course organisation to enable students to manage their studies alongside other commitments?

2. Do students have a voice in relation to the way the course is organised and **managed**? How do you seek their views, reflect on these views and respond?

3. What agency do students have over their **educational gain**? i.e., what they gain from their educational experience? How are students encouraged to reflect on what they have gained? How does the course team know what each student has gained?

What does the course team do to prepare students to engage with their course?

4. At the beginning of the course, do you ensure all students **know how** the course will run, how to access and use course resources and how they will be assessed on the course?

5. At the beginning of the course, do you diagnostically assess each student's **knowledge** of the subject, and their academic and digital skills? If so, do you provide additional resources and support for students who have gaps in their skills and knowledge, and signpost them to academic support services? If not, can you do this?

6. At the beginning of the course, do you ascertain each student's concerns, perceptions, ambitions and barriers to engagement? How do you proactively support students to **overcome barriers** to engagement?

Does the course team provide guidance when students need it?

7. Do all new students know, from the start of the course, who to **contact** if part of their experience isn't meeting their expectations? Do new students receive meaningful contact swiftly on arrival, so they have an individual link to academic staff, and are they appropriately signposted to their Course Director, Academic Advisor and other named contacts for responses?

8. At the beginning of the course, do you establish ethical and **behavioural expectations** for students? How? Do you ensure that students on the course know what they can expect from the course team, so they do not have unrealistic expectations, e.g., response times or levels of support?

9. Do you have planned, clear, accessible, course communications at **critical times** (e.g., pre-arrival, assessment periods, during off-campus placements, and when there are timetable changes)?

10. How does the course team support students to **progress** through the course and prepare to successfully progress from their course? Are employability and careers guidance integrated into the course?

What personalised support and advice is available to students on the course?

11. Does every student have a named **academic advisor**? Do you have a clear process for students to discuss and progress their learning with their academic advisor at every stage of their course? Are academic advisors able to engage with students individually and follow-up on any issues?

12. How does the course team respond to **wellbeing** issues raised by a student? How does the course team identify and refer a student to Student Services when needed? What is the mechanism for follow-up and support by the course team?

13. Do you use **GenAI** to supplement student academic support? Are students encouraged to use GenAI to support their learning?

For further reading on **Student Agency** see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support with developing student agency contact CLT.

2. Inclusive Learning

A course should provide accessible learning opportunities for all because every student must have an opportunity to succeed.

Consideration of different student contexts, and removal of barriers to learning and attainment, is fundamental to course design and management. We must ensure our courses are designed to enable all students to engage and complete their studies with a positive outcome. An inclusive course must be planned and managed to appropriately support, develop, and challenge each student. Assessment methods, learning environments, teaching approaches and resources should all be examined to ensure they are clear to all learners and treat students equitably.

All students benefit from studying in an inclusive course community. Inclusive assessment methods that enable all students to demonstrate their learning outcomes will reduce the need for alternative assessments. Embedded opportunities for students to share their diverse perceptions and experiences, and learning activities and case studies that involve them working with a range of perspectives and standpoints, should help students to build connections to see the benefit of inclusive practice and the new perspectives it brings.

Reflective questions for course teams

Is inclusive learning planned and managed?

1. Have you included a clear statement related to inclusive **approaches** within your student-facing course documents?
2. Do you consider how **timetables** may affect different students? Do you seek and engage with student feedback about the course timetable?
3. Do you have a systematic process for the course team to consider the **clarity** of assessment criteria and the calibration and moderation of marking processes? Are all members of the course team involved and aware of it?
4. Does your course have a consistent language and structure across all its course materials and online spaces, that students can easily navigate? Do you regularly review the appropriateness of the language and imagery used in your course and module materials? Are the teaching materials and **resources,** provided to students, developed using best practice advice on accessibility and inclusivity?
5. Does your course **content** represent a diversity of contributors with consideration given to gender, sexual orientation, religion and belief, disability, age, socio-economic background, race and ethnicity? Do you consult with students about curriculum content?
6. Do you review the dates and timings of your assessment launch and submission dates with consideration of religious and/or **cultural obligations** and observances?

Are all students supported in an inclusive learning community?

7. How do you identify and refer a student in need of **support** appropriately and in a timely manner? Is there an effective system in place for tailoring support to those who have RAPs? Have you consulted with academic support services about how best to support international students on your course?

8. Does your course design consider students' **prior learning** and lived experiences (e.g. of international students or students from underrepresented groups)?

9. Do you establish clear ground rules for respectful communication? Do you work to provide a stimulating but safe environment for all students to share different perspectives?

Are there opportunities for all students to develop and be challenged?

10. Do your chosen learning activities engage students in a range of views, **perspectives** and cultural contexts? Do you facilitate managed contextualised discussions as part of the classroom activity. Do you facilitate contextualised discussions and meaningful dialogue as part of classroom activities? Do you manage free speech and meaningful dialogue in a learning environment in which all students feel safe to contribute?

11. Do you provide opportunities and clear ground rules for behaviour in groupwork activities?

12. Are there clear connections between learning opportunities and course assessments? Has the appropriate preparation and scaffolding for assessment been designed so that all students feel supported and prepared for assessment?

13. If the course involves experiential learning, are there clear embedded and accessible **opportunities** for all students to engage with quality and equality checked placements and internships? Is there a clear process to prepare and support all students in placement/internship learning environments?

For further reading on **Inclusive Learning**, see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support developing inclusive learning on your course contact CLT.

3. Valid Assessment

Each course should have an assessment strategy that clearly justifies what is to be assessed, how and when because a student's performance on their course must be purposefully, reliably, and fairly assessed.

We need to evaluate each student's achievement on their course. This requires a robust course assessment strategy that maps the course's assessments against the course's intended learning outcomes. Identifying what will be assessed and why, how and why, and when and why, is particularly important on those courses where assessment is organised around modules, as it provides an overview of each student's assessments, so that progression can be supported, and overassessment can be avoided.

The term 'assessment' is currently used variously across the sector to describe a plethora of formative, developmental activities (assessment for learning and assessment as learning), and summative activities (assessment of learning), and is often conflated with the term 'feedback'. It is important to disentangle feedback and formative activity (an element of the learning process) from summative assessment (the measurement of achievement on a course). Summative assessment should provide an accurate and meaningful measurement of a student's holistic capability to apply knowledge and skills in a relevant context appropriate to their level of study.

Reflective questions for course teams

Do you have a course assessment strategy?

1. Is there a published **course assessment strategy**? Do all members of the course team, and all students on the course, have access to this strategy? If not, is it possible to do this?
2. Are the course's learning outcomes concise, meaningful, and achievable? Does every assessment that a student undertakes measure these course learning outcomes and is this formally **mapped**?
3. Does the course team know what each student's **assessment journey** through the course will be, and is each assessment designed to effectively support students' progression towards achieving the course's learning outcomes?

What do you assess and why?

4. Are the course's learning outcomes **relevant**? Do they reflect the required capabilities in an evolving AI world? Are you assessing capabilities that are no longer high value?
5. Does the course team's approach to assessment explicitly assess **course learning outcomes** and the discipline's threshold concepts, behaviours, knowledge and skills?
6. Do you assess using **module learning outcomes**? If so, why? Is it clear how assessed module learning outcomes build towards course learning outcomes?

7. Is assessment appropriately varied across the course to validly assess different skills and knowledge?
8. Are you **over-assessing**? Are all the assessments on the course necessary? Could the assessment and marking loads be reduced? Is there any assessment that could be reworked, combined (e.g. synoptic assessment), or discontinued?

How do you assess and why?

9. How do you ensure assessment is **reliable**? Given the availability of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools and other technologies and services, how do you design assessments that are secure? Are expectations about the use of tools for assessments explicit and well understood, and do you know that no student will be disadvantaged because of differential access to tools?
10. Is an individual student's grade determined, in part, by the contributions of other agents, e.g. students (through assessed groupwork) or GenAI? If so, how do you ensure assessment of the individual student's achievement is **fair**?
11. How do you ensure **authenticity** in assessment? Do you use synoptic assessments that require bringing together learning from several parts of the course, or are all assessments siloed at module level?

When do you assess and why?

12. **When,** in the course, are the course's learning outcomes most appropriately assessed?
13. Do students always have an opportunity to develop, **review** and further develop their work before submitting it for summative assessment? Do students have an opportunity to 'fail safely' and seek support prior to summative assessment? Have you spoken to academic support services about providing additional tailored support both before and after assessments?
14. Are assessment deadlines sensibly spaced? Do you have a course assessment **calendar**?

Are the course's curriculum and assessments aligned?

15. Do you develop your curriculum (what is to be learned/taught) before your assessment strategy (what is to be assessed)? If so, why do you do this? Is your curriculum **overstuffed**? What content might be removed? Is there any 'delivery' time that could be reallocated to ensuring valid and reliable assessment?

For further reading on **Valid Assessment** see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support with designing and managing valid assessment contact CLT.

4. Effective Teaching and Feedback

Effective teaching and feedback: A course's teaching and feedback should be designed together to actively support learning because learning is a process of iterative improvement.

For a learner to be able to improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities in a subject area, they need to understand what quality in the discipline looks like; to be able to judge their own work against this concept of quality; and to improve their own work to meet this. Teaching should therefore provide a framework for learners to gain an understanding of quality in the discipline, and to empower students to use feedback to improve their work actively and iteratively.

Effective teaching and feedback focuses on the learner's participation and must be responsive, flexible and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of learners and their different perspectives. Building student-staff relationships, clearly communicating expectations, encouraging active participation in a safe learning environment, using constructive developmental feedback, and respecting diverse student views and contexts are the key tenets of student-centred teaching and feedback.

Reflective questions for course teams

How do you encourage contact between students and the course team?

1. How do you foster **student/staff relationships** on the course? How do you foster student/staff relationships on the course and how do you set boundaries to protect staff time and staff wellbeing?

2. Does the course team have a coherent communications strategy? Do you provide multiple **communication channels** for students? How do members of the course team communicate with students and with one another? Is communication effective?

How do you develop reciprocity and co-operation among students?

3. What do you do to develop a course culture of **reciprocity** and to build a sense of connection, interaction, peer learning and co-creation in a learning community? How do you encourage students to support one another's learning? Does the course team encourage peer support mechanisms, e.g., course-based societies?

4. How do you design learning activities to support **student collaboration** (e.g., through groupwork, peer evaluation or debate)? How do you organise collaborative activities to ensure all students feel included and have the best opportunity to succeed?

How do you encourage active learning?

5. How do your pedagogical approaches encourage **deep learning** (e.g., problem-based learning, flipped approaches, self-evaluation, peer-review)?

6. Do you provide opportunities for students to actively engage in learning both inside and outside of timetabled sessions? Are these opportunities structured/scaffolded and differentiated?

How do students access prompt feedback?

7. Is **formative feedback** integrated into the course in a way and at a time that is developmental? How do students access timely feedback they can reflect and act upon? Do you encourage students to seek, engage with, and take up feedback from other students, stakeholders and/or technologies (e.g. GenAI)?

8. Do you work with students to develop **constructive** approaches to using feedback, to enable students to understand all feedback channels and to create a learning loop? Does feedback encourage students to improve their work and make links to their learning in other parts of the course?

How do you emphasise time on task?

9. Do you **scaffold** students' learning by breaking down requirements into aligned, scheduled and manageable learning activities? Do you support new students to work on small tasks with short deadlines, increasing the size of tasks and length of deadlines as a student progresses through their course?

10. Are students made aware of detailed task **requirements** and the time a learning task would typically take to complete to a high standard?

How do you communicate high expectations?

11. Are expectations clear? Do you communicate your belief, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds and disadvantaged groups, that they can **achieve highly** on the course? How do you do this?

12. Do students know what **high-quality work** looks like? Do you provide exemplars, work through solutions in class, and share excellent work completed by students who have previously studied the course? If not, can you do this?

How do you respect diverse talents and ways of working?

13. How do you encourage students to draw on their **strengths**? How do you scaffold, promote and explicitly value students' particular strengths on your course?

14. How do you make sure all students are challenged appropriately and **differentiate** learning activities to engage students who are excelling and those who may be struggling? How do you scaffold support for the different ability levels of students whilst still maintaining a consistent approach to course requirements and criteria?

For further reading on **Effective Teaching and Feedback**, see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support developing effective teaching and feedback contact CLT.

5. Course Identity

A course should be an identifiable entity, studied by an identifiable cohort of students, and facilitated by an identifiable team because student engagement is supported through a sense of mattering and belonging to a course community.

Student engagement is enhanced by a student's sense of mattering and belonging. Belonging (social, personal, academic) is complex and can fluctuate - students can choose to belong at different times and in different spaces - but belonging is tightly related to student wellbeing, to students' motivation and to academic outcomes.

A strong course identity can improve belonging and mattering. Course identity is best developed through an identifiable course team who feel a sense of responsibility for an identifiable cohort of students. Developing relationships between staff and students has been shown to contribute to a sense of belonging and mattering, and to higher achievement and increased progression. Consistent course communications from a clearly identified course team help develop a sense of shared understanding of course expectations from pre-entry onwards. Dedicated physical and online course spaces, and course activities can make students feel secure. Course identity is further strengthened when students share experiences across levels and cohorts or engage with course-based peer mentoring.

Reflective questions for course teams

Is the course an identifiable entity?

1. How is the course **distinctive**? What do students need to know about the course before deciding to study it? What might attract students to the course, and how do you promote this to potential students (and to graduate employers)?

2. Does the course have optional modules or **pathways**? Does the course share modules with other courses? If so, does this impact on students' sense of identity, shared experience, and belonging to a course cohort? Does this detract from the sense of course identity or does it foster new perspectives and life skills?

3. Is the course more than a collection of modules? Is assessment at module level or are there opportunities for students to bring their learning together through **synoptic** assessment?

4. What do you do to specifically develop and strengthen a sense of **course community**? How do you foster a sense of social and personal belonging (particularly if the students are studying online or part-time)?

5. What course communications do you have? Do your **course communications** clarify the course's specific identity and the course's professional, behavioural, social and academic expectations? Is there a strong course culture?

6. Does the course have a physical and/or virtual **home** that is consistently used as an entry point for students on the course to interact with one another and the course team, and to access all their course related resources? If not, are there any barriers to doing this? What course social/welcome activities and networks are there?

Is there an identifiable cohort of students?

7. Is the course designed to support students to build relationships with other students on the course? What does the course team do to encourage students to see themselves as **members** of a cohort and members of the course? Does the course team use any targeted interventions to ensure students from non-traditional backgrounds or disadvantaged students can develop a sense of belonging?

8. Do members of the course team know the **names** of the students on the course? If not, what are the barriers to this?

Is there an identifiable course team?

9. How do the course team **introduce themselves**, and make themselves known, to the students?

10. Does the course team feel a **sense of ownership** of the course? If not, what are the barriers?

11. Do all staff teaching or supporting the course (including part time and fractional staff) know who else teaches on/facilitates the course? Does the extended course team include **identifiable colleagues** from the library, student services, careers and other professional services?

12. Does the course team **meet**/communicate regularly? If not, why not? Are members of the extended course team included in course team meetings and communications? Are course team reflections captured at various points of the year and used to implement changes?

13. How do staff work together? Are there any opportunities for **staff collaboration** across the course? Do course team members 'team teach' or actively observe and/or contribute to each other's sessions?

For further reading on **Course Identity**, see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support developing your course's identity contact CLT.

6. Course Coherence

A course should be designed as a unified whole because a course's learning outcomes, learning opportunities, assessment and support must be aligned, planned and managed together to maximise student continuation, completion and success.

All students should have the opportunity to engage with and succeed on a coherent programme of study. By adopting a whole course perspective, we will be better able to support students to transition into, through and from a course.

The principle of course coherence underpins the other five principles. Pre-arrival communication and course induction should empower students to be agents of their own learning and success, able to engage with their course's curriculum, to participate in the course's learning activities, to seek and use feedback effectively, and to complete course assessments. Where a course is modularised, students (and staff) should be able to see connections between the modules and levels and understand how learning activities and assessment fit into the course. To support this, module learning outcomes should be mapped to, and directly support, the course's learning outcomes. Assessments should be aligned between and across levels, and ideas and course themes should be revisited and reinforced in different modules and at different levels to support deeper, synergistic learning.

Reflective questions for course teams

Is the course designed coherently?

1. Does the course feel well-co-ordinated? Are the course's curriculum, teaching approaches and management well integrated? Are some parts of the course fragmented or piecemeal?

2. Is course induction effective? How do you support students to prepare, orientate and integrate?

3. How are students supported to make a coherent **transition** between each academic level, and from the course to progress into employment and further study?

Does the course have a planned course curriculum?

4. Do the course learning outcomes concisely **encapsulate** what students must be able to do by the end of the course? Are there coherent, aligned learning outcomes for each level? Is there a clear distinction between requirements for each level of a course? Is it possible to simplify/reduce the number of course and level learning outcomes without compromising the course's overall aims?

5. Has the curriculum been developed holistically to support the course's learning outcomes and course assessment strategy? Do the course's subject strands **spiral** across the course's modules and through levels, developing the threshold concepts of the discipline, revisiting, and consolidating ideas and supporting the application and integration of knowledge for assessment? Are these connections clear to the course team and the students?

6. How are the course's intended learning outcomes achieved where there are **optional modules**? How are the intended learning outcomes of different optional modules mapped? How does the course assessment strategy accommodate students studying different optional modules?

7. If you teach on a module shared between more than one course, how do you **contextualise** and differentiate the content and assessments, so they are relevant to students on different courses?

8. How is the course designed to require students to build on and use formative feedback they gain in one part of the course in other parts of the course? How are opportunities built-in for students to use formative feedback, and what they have learned in previous assessments, to **feed forward** into future assessments and other modules?

Is the course managed and supported by the course team?

9. Are **decisions** made at course level? How are decisions about the course made and by whom? As a course team, do you communicate with each other, and the wider course team, about course design and **enhancements** and how the course is evolving and developing? Do you communicate about individual students to ensure their needs are being **supported consistently** across the course?

10. Is there **consistent messaging** across the course? Are expectations, requirements and language consistent across the course?

For further reading on **Course Coherence** see the associated Talis Reading List. For case studies, resources and further support developing a coherent course contact CLT.