

From Needs Analysis to Curriculum Development: Designing an Intensive EAP Course for Pre-sessional Students

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Abstract

The question as to which type of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support is appropriate for pre-undergraduate students generally centres on whether students are provided general EAP or discipline specific EAP. Should students' level of English be too low for either, students are frequently offered General English. The majority of our students at the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH) fell into the latter category, but included a significant number of intermediate level students. In addition to diverse learners, the transition from a former 2 year to a 1 year programme rendered a general English module insufficient to meet the academic needs and motivations of the students. Consequently, a flexible curriculum able to serve both low and mid-level learners and robust enough to survive change, was sought. This paper describes how two important changes to our curriculum have dramatically improved reading and writing competence for what were lower level English learners. We

examine curriculum principles and framework and challenge aspects of traditional EAP pedagogy by a focus on task authenticity rather than authenticity of text.

Our previous curriculum driver could be described as book-driven, in that we tried to fit our context, UKH in Kurdistan, to the specifications of a book. The diversity of student population and transition to a single year foundation programme enabled us to revise our curriculum and develop our own bespoke contextually relevant materials, guided by a significant change in curriculum principles. We argue that EAP is both accessible to lower level learners, and that an institution's unique context must be the driver of a curriculum, not a general book. In conclusion, we now have a robust and context-sensitive curriculum that can serve the needs of our present learners, but is flexible to grow and adapt as our learners' needs and type of student change.

Keywords: Curriculum design, Middle East, Student centred, Context-driven, Background, English,

Major transitional changes at the University of Kurdistan have impacted the language provision unit of the University. The English Language Programme (formally known as 'Access') was reduced from a two-year preparatory programme to a one year EAP Foundation. To aid the transition, the Vice-Chancellor initiated a new strategy for an effective and inclusive communicative approach, known as De-Bono's Six Thinking Hats, which utilised lateral thinking tools.

The Six Thinking Hats approach was used as the core for all consultations and this enabled the EAP staff to be included in the process of designing and taking ownership of a new curriculum. As a result, the team were able to construct a new curriculum and framework which was student-centred, met the demands of the undergraduate (UG) lecturers in addition to the Common European Framework of Reference for language competency standards within a limited time period.

The rational for the one-year EAP course

It was perceived that students from 'Access' were inappropriately equipped linguistically, attitudinally and skills-wise to meet minimally acceptable standards of student participation and scholarly production at UG study. Furthermore, it was evident from both student and staff feedback that motivation, engagement and participation in class were fairly poor.

Upon identifying specifications from needs analyses of both students and EAP staff feedback, a new curriculum emerged. The curriculum framework used for the one-year foundation programme was informed by three core concepts of knowledge, skills, attitude and values. To ensure that these elements were addressed for our UG1 target context, seven guiding principles were defined, against which all decisions were measured. The UKH curriculum principles were transferability, authenticity, progress, minimally acceptable standards, planned extension, student-centredness (engaging, creative, responsive), and a positive student experience.

To further ensure we met these principles, Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains (Bloom, 1956)

was used to ensure students progressed from the lower order thinking skills and associated language demands in Foundation, to the higher order level skills and language required as they progress through their Undergraduate and Postgraduate studies at UKH.

Using the model, the curriculum design principles of transferability, authenticity, and progress were met. In short, this should better ensure an identifiable transitional English language-learning journey for both students and UG staff. Thus, it is hoped that UG staff will have a clearer set of language expectations for students progressing to UG level.

Student centred and contextualised teaching materials

The Middle Eastern classroom is often characterized as a passive learning environment consisting of students with an educational background mainly based on lectures, memorisation and examinations (Chadraba & O Keefe, 2007). Such students are unfamiliar with project based work, group work, and independent work such as homework and research. Failure to undertake these autonomous learning opportunities is often perceived by Western teachers as lazy avoidance of independent learning. However, “resistance to autonomy is not a justification for reverting to more traditional, non-autonomy oriented practices” (Brown et al, 2007), but it is clear that EAP instructors as well as UG lecturers at HE Middle Eastern institutions have to be aware of the importance of gradually developing students’ autonomy and critical thinking skills. This naturally implies an adaptation of teaching materials to the Middle Eastern context.

Even though many EAP materials are moving away from the Anglo Saxon focus to a wider range of global topics, many of the EAP materials being used at UKH were too complex to be understood by our students who were on a IELTS level equivalent to 3.5 to 4.5. In order to optimise the student experience in the classroom, we tried to contextualise teaching materials in the different modules.

Studies have shown that by contextualising materials around the students’ journey, the learning environment can be more motivating (Mahrus and Ahmed, 2010). The practical classroom experience at UKH confirmed this as students showed increased engagement with the tasks and participated in contextualised discussions to a higher degree than previously seen in the classroom. The approach where teachers were able to be more creative with the materials and where they had freedom to prepare the classroom tasks, although challenging, proved rewarding, and was reflected in both teachers’ and students’ attitudes.

Needs analysis

In order to design and develop the curriculum, all foundation students were given a needs analysis questionnaire prior to the start of the semester. Simultaneously, undergraduate lecturers took part in a focus group where they discussed the basic tasks and level of understanding required of UG students. Both students and UG lecturers were given questionnaires with 20 academic skills listed. Students were asked which skills they thought should be taught during the semester to best equip them for study at an undergraduate level. The lecturers were asked to identify the skills they perceived as essential at a UG level.

The responses to both questionnaires were analysed to ascertain any correlation between results. Interestingly, respondents identified four common skills: grammar, writing essays, note taking from texts and reading textbooks and journal articles. The students also selected speaking and listening in general conversations which would be more suitable for a general English course rather than an EAP course. Although we chose not to include these within the syllabus due to their ‘English for General Purpose’ content, students were encouraged to take part in a minimum of 2 hours a week of self-study in these subjects and extra activities were provided by the listening teacher. Therefore, the 4 common subjects became the core of the new curriculum in the form of an Academic Writing and Language Development module (which included remedial grammar), the Academic Reading module and the Academic Listening module.

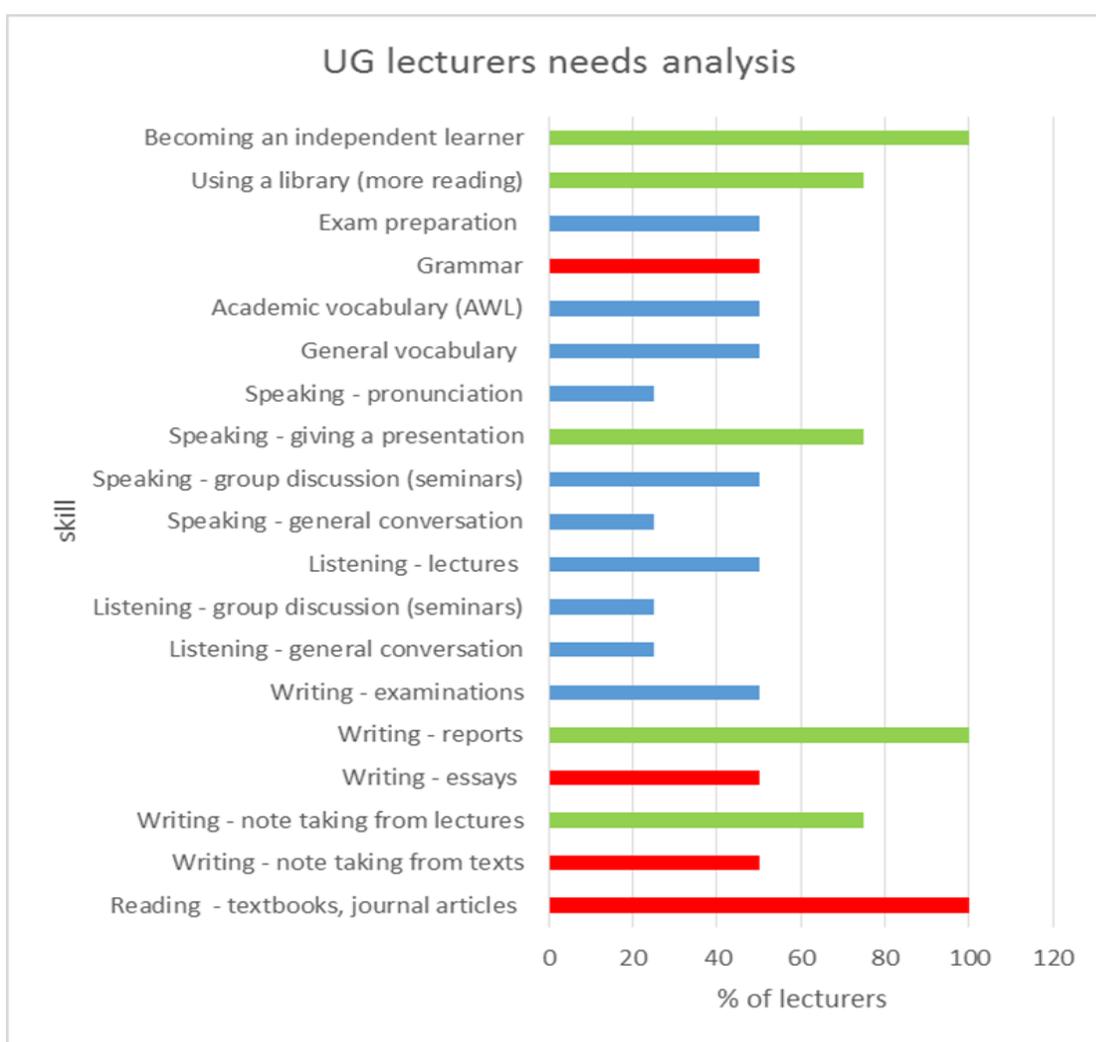


Figure 1: UG lecturers' responses to the needs analysis questionnaire. The red bars show the common themes selected by both students and lecturers.

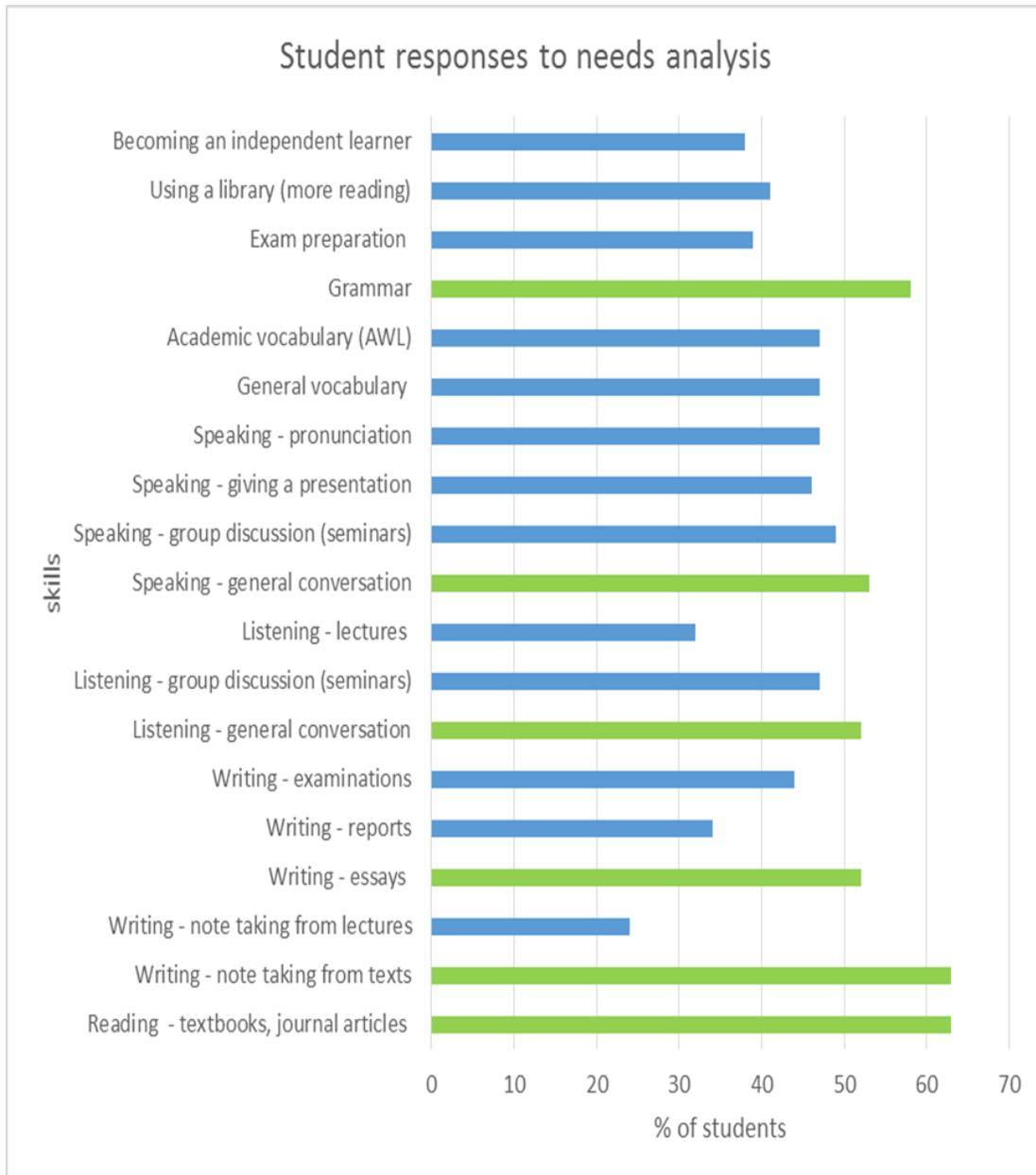


Figure 2: Students' responses to the needs analysis questionnaire. The green bars show the most selected skills (more than 50%) by the UG lecturers.

Mid semester evaluations

Students were given questionnaires at the end of each task cycle (every four weeks) to gain general

feedback. Questions were specific, asking students to agree or disagree with statements such as ‘I feel more confident using conjunctions’. The three questionnaires revealed that students generally felt as if they were improving in all skill areas. At the end of task cycle one, interestingly 100% of students who took the questionnaire said they already feel as if they are improving as a writer (see figure 3).

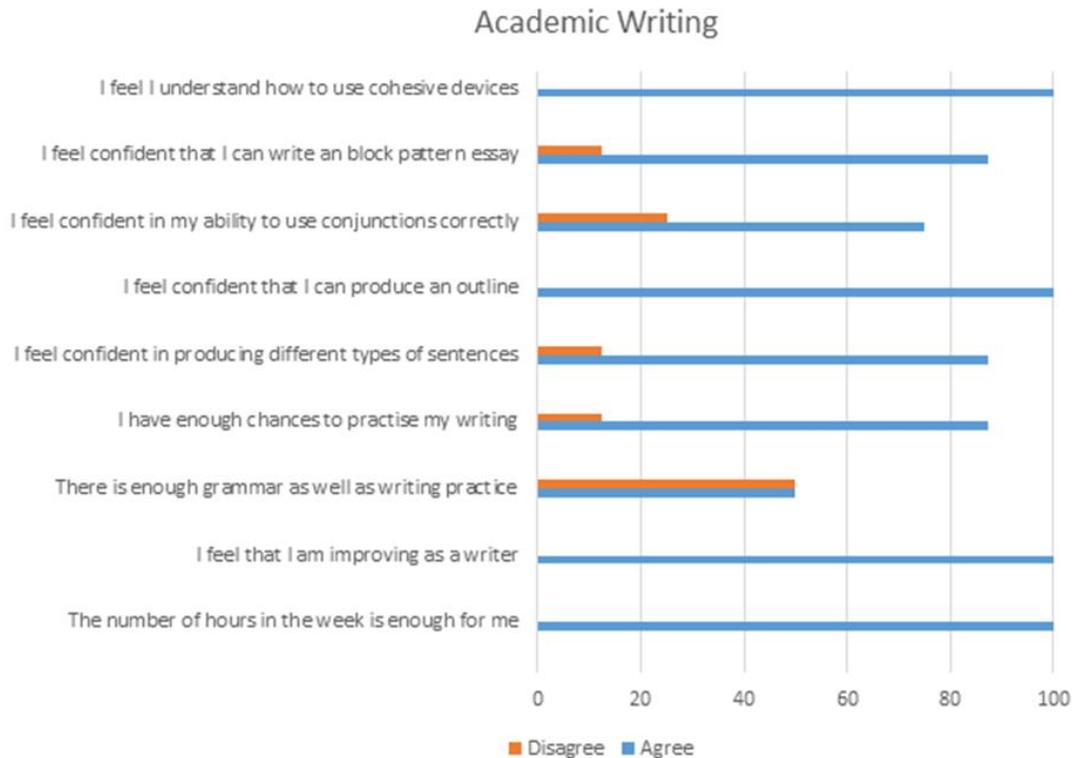


Figure 3: Students' responses to end of cycle 1 questionnaires – Academic writing

End of semester questionnaires

At the end of the first semester, the students were given a different type of questionnaire eliciting feedback on their lessons and the programme in general. We also questioned whether having exams every 4 weeks was excessive, but only 18% answered in the affirmative.

Overall, students stated that they found the 3 topic cycles very useful and beneficial for learning. From the open ended section of the questionnaire, the most common complaint was that there was a lack of speaking activities within the class as the lessons were mostly reading and writing based. However, this was something that was taken into consideration for the next semester.

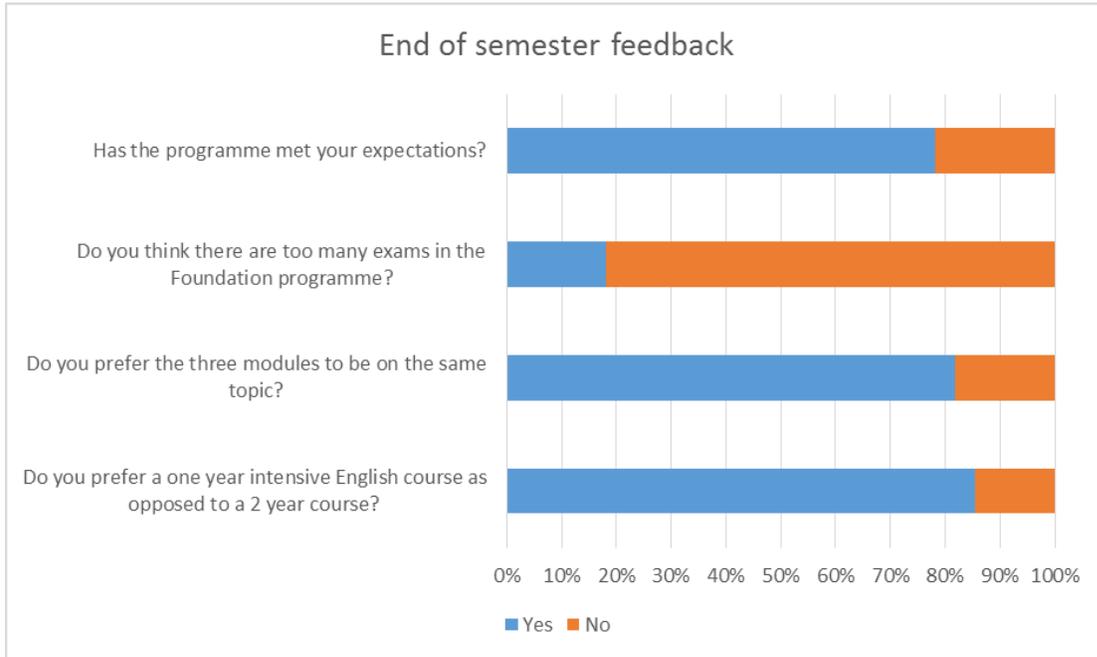


Figure 4: End of semester feedback by students

The open ended comments box on the questionnaire also became a space for students to share their positive feedback such as the comments below:



Figure 5: Word cloud displaying some of the positive comments from the end of semester questionnaire

Academic Reading Module

The reading module was designed on the 7 guiding principles outlined above. This course was defined as being a source of English where new vocabulary was met within a context, noticed and unpacked for understanding. The themed cycle-based approach allowed new acquisitions of language to be utilised within the productive module (writing). Clear remits were therefore established early on to avoid repetition between the modules and maximize useful opportunities to deepen vocabulary knowledge. Cycle texts for reading were chosen to reflect authenticity of task rather than of content. We chose texts which were of a reasonable length (re 850 - 900 words) allowing opportunities for analysis of discourse within lessons and incorporated the progressive element into the course by choosing texts which were progressively more complex in content.

As many students had a relatively low level of English, we sought to reduce the cognitive demands they faced by choosing topics which were familiar to them within the Kurdish context thereby encouraging focus on language acquisition. Texts were given in order of complexity thereby adhering to our principle of progression. Our concern for learner-centered led to a focus on the learner journey and acknowledge the various needs represented within our student body. Recognising that many students had a limited reservoir of general English, focus was given to both Academic Word List (AWL) and General Service List (GSL) vocabulary items, which the students might encounter in their future studies. The chosen texts were analysed to identify words which were essential for a general understanding of the text, and for those which were important for deeper understanding, and those items which would enable a thorough comprehension.

Resulting categorised vocabulary lists were further exploited by highlighting items from the AWL using an online AWL highlighter, which subsequently formed the focus of vocabulary tests at the completion of each cycle. Students were given texts in which the target vocabulary was highlighted to encourage noticing of words in context. These were accompanied by a worksheet which students used to notice and analyse the highlighted words.

Each themed cycle contained two texts accompanied by worksheets which aimed to scaffold the learning process through enabling students to practice the skills they would need in UG (prediction, skimming for gist, scanning for detail, deduction of meaning etc.). The use of two themed texts increased the opportunities for recycling and expansion of new words. As the course progressed, it became apparent that many students had limited dictionary skills being unable to identify the correct definition of homonyms from context. As a response to this need, worksheets were produced which scaffolded learning to help students notice and more accurately deduce the meaning of homonyms. This change positively affected the student experience and was later incorporated into the cycle exams to ensure that learners were being tested on skills and items which had been a focus of their learning experience.

Academic Listening Module

As with the writing and reading, the listening module was also part of the 3 task cycle curriculum.

Lectures and tasks in the listening module were all theme based and were designed to feed into the writing lesson. From the previous feedback from students regarding speaking and listening, some common complaints were that the tasks were not academic enough, too easy and they did not look at preparation for undergraduate study. With this feedback in mind, and teamed with the fact the timetable only permitted one hour of listening a week, we decided to make the course purely academic based. Student activities included listening to real academic lectures, various different note taking styles and activities, listening for comprehension and listening for gist. Each lesson started with a general discussion based on the theme of the lesson both as a lesson warm up and as a task to engage the students with the topic.

Academic Writing and Language Development

At the start of each cycle, the students were given a model essay for the particular rhetorical function we were focusing on, which was connected to the theme for that cycle. Model essays included highlighted academic words, which aided transferability of items and lessened the demand on learners who were already familiar with this concept in the reading module. This model essay was then analysed in class to notice Academic Word List items, grammatical functions, sentence structure, paragraph structure and essay structure. Similarly, grammar was contextualised in the model essays, which allowed it to be set at the students' level and need. Lessons were intended to be more meaningful as language was taught using student-generated essays and worksheets which were produced by isolating certain grammar features from model or student essays.

The production of tutor written model essays allowed for a tailoring of content which reflected the learners' context (Kurdistan), and the inclusion of concepts from the reading class, in addition to expansion of world knowledge, concepts and vocabulary.

For example, an essay contrasting a Kurdish diet to the Nordic diet picked up on the theme of saturated fats and food which students were exposed to in the receptive modules. Having worked on the language functions of the essay, the students wrote essays with the same rhetorical function as the model and related to the common theme. Essay tasks were related to the local Kurdistan context combining the elements of authenticity of task through the use of compare/contrast or advantage/disadvantage tasks with familiarity of content.

Regular feedback from the students allowed the team to modify the following cycle's contents to allow for a more positive student experience. For example, as a response to student feedback, the portfolio content was reduced in order to allow the students more time to focus on practising and improving their written skills. The students completed the first two cycles' essays in class in order to increase the reliability of the results and the final cycle essay was produced at home. This followed the principles of progression and authenticity.

Reflections

The process involved in curriculum design has been hugely beneficial for the team's professional development. By starting with the concerns of stake-holders, (UG professors and students) we were

able to hone a course which was based on fundamental principles rather than subjective suppositions. Our context-sensitive curriculum although challenging to implement due to the heavy workload involved, was flexible enough to respond to changing or newly realized learner needs. The clarity of purpose established for each module enabled comprehensive transferability of learning between receptive and productive elements in an aligned programme. Challenges related to limited resources, time constraints and often over-whelming workloads were overcome due to the cohesiveness within the teaching team. This was largely a result of the team's involvement in curriculum design and their commitment to the principles which underpinned it. This collective ownership proved vital for the successful implementation of the venture and increased staff motivation levels, which also affected the students' level of engagement demonstrated by higher levels of attendance.

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