How to Develop a Professional Curriculum

There is no universal recipe for developing a curriculum but there are some guiding principles that you can use to help create a curriculum or to assess your current offering. The following short guide is intended to provide a checklist of ideas.

**What is a curriculum and why have one?**

A curriculum is a group of coordinated learning opportunities related to a particular discipline. The purpose of a curriculum is to provide a coherent, accessible means of helping people to target their development in a planned way so that it builds and sustains professional capability. Individuals can and do develop expertise in isolation, but the benefit of curriculum is that it provides a structure within which individuals know what is possible and that is geared to meeting organisational and professional priorities.

**Where do I start?**

The first thing to do is to gain agreement to the purpose and scope of the curriculum and the relative priorities. For example, is it to:

- provide a minimum standard to those entering the profession
- establish deep expertise in key areas of expertise
- cultivate stronger professional leadership
- provide a cadre of professionals with the flexibility to work in different organisations or contexts
- provide a pathway from junior to senior levels
- provide consistency and equity in professional development
- address capability gaps
- grow an identified group of talented individuals
- improve levels of skill, credibility or career mobility
This will involve discussions with key stakeholders, HR, CSL and the business. The stronger the consensus the more likely it is that you will be able to build a curriculum that meets expectations and delivers real benefits.

**What does a good curriculum look like?**

The *look* can vary enormously but it usually consists of a simple architecture that the reader can grasp straight away without explanation. This visual structure needs to work in print and online. This might be in the form of a table where the sections are broken down into categories. For example:

- foundation, technical, leadership
- beginners, intermediate, advanced
- grades
- training, qualifications, CPD

It is generally best to choose the strongest defining characteristics of the target audience and the types of programmes, but try more than one option to see which provides the clearest and easiest to follow structure.

Another way to represent a curriculum is as a series of journeys or pathways. This is particularly useful where setting a definitive route would be welcomed as a corporate standard rather than the freedoms that go with more of a self selection approach to meet diverse needs.

**How do you choose which topics to include?**

Most professions have a competency framework or skills map. That is a good place to start. But also think about:

- what people need at every stage of their professional life
- the ranges of roles people undertake
- the variety of routes people take in building their professional career
• the organisation’s capability priorities now and for the future
• industry standards and external benchmarks
• what will do most to drive the profession forward

You may want to undertake some form of training needs analysis or benchmarking. Identify key themes and then break them down into discrete topic areas that can be learnt as bite-sized chunks.

Think about whether you want a core suit of products that provide the backbone of the curriculum, and whether you need to mandate any of those products for certain groups, grades or roles. Some niche topics or latest ideas may lend themselves to a more flexible, self selection approach.

**So it is OK to have a large, all encompassing curriculum?**

There is no one right size for a curriculum; it has to be fit for purpose. Many people feel that a smaller, tighter and more focussed curriculum is easier to understand and concentrates your effort on key priorities. However, the larger and more diverse your target audience the more likely it is that they will require a richer and more expansive offering.

You may initially start with a longer list of possibilities. However, it is important to consider viability (likely numbers who will take that development, costs, etc.), complexity and the need for cohesion. This should help you prioritise down to those products which are the most crucial.

**What about different types of learning?**

In recent years there have been changes around what is viewed as best practice. The move has been towards supported workplace learning, wider approaches to learning online, shorter modularised courses and stronger links between academic study and learning through real work experiences.
Modern curricula usually include a mix of approaches to suit different needs. Often these different learning methods are blended together to form a programme or ‘journey’ which learners progress through over time.

**What about qualifications?**

For some professions you have to be qualified to enter, here the question is whether and how to support higher level qualifications. For others, the question is around foundation qualifications and whether to mandate, encourage or merely offer them, and for which people. In some professions there is less of an emphasis on qualifications and more on CPD and skills development.

As a minimum all professions should actively consider their position on qualifications. They can help boost standards, credibility and provide more rounded expertise. Equally they can be expensive, time-consuming and provide learning that is not in line with the needs of the organisation.

There are many options open including:

- getting existing provision accredited
- working with an accredited supplier to provide a dedicated qualification programme
- endorsing a selected external programme as the approved route
- having an approved list of qualifications that will be supported
- setting out the principles for supporting qualifications and allowing individuals to make the case for the qualification that best suits their situation

It can be useful to map the qualification landscape in your profession and identify which types of qualifications people have in which roles/grades and to then assess whether that profile fits the needs of the profession. It may be desirable over the next 5 years, for example, to get more junior professionals qualified to provide a pipeline of expertise. Or you may want a few people highly qualified in those really business critical areas. The aim being to build the capability profile required for the future.
Accreditation of prior learning may be worth considering if you have a highly experienced but under-qualified workforce. Although learning new things is not inherently part of that process, most people do find they have gaps and then fill them, so this is not simply a rubber stamp exercise, it does usually add value too.

**Who is covered by the curriculum?**

Many professions find it hard to define the boundaries to the profession. There is often a wider community of people who work in and around each discipline but are sometimes not recognised as being formally within the profession. These include support staff, people from other professions, people in transitory roles and those who manage people in the profession but are not in the profession itself. The question is whether the curriculum needs to embrace these people, perhaps to provide an entry into the profession or just to provide targeted skills.

Different products within the curriculum will be targeted at different groups and you can define which are open only to those clearly working in the profession and those that offer a profession-specific topic but may be valuable to a wider audience.

**What about talent and leadership?**

Many professions have a talent programme to help bring in and develop deep expertise or the future leadership of the profession. The curriculum should include such development programmes. But you may also want to think more widely about developing talent. Are there any groups that are underrepresented at the senior levels of the profession? Are the senior professionals hitting a glass ceiling that stops them getting to Board level? These types of issues can take years to address but having the right development in the curriculum is an important consideration.

**What about Continuing Professional Development (CPD)?**

The curriculum may include programmes, training and events specifically to provide CPD. This is likely to be on those topics relevant to the Civil Service, or simply where it is more cost effective to offer this in-house. Such events may include internal
speakers or professionals teaching professionals; although they take some
organising, these are usually highly valued by those attending. A curriculum is
unlikely to meet all CPD requirements and it is often best to point people towards
those things better done externally by professional bodies or suppliers rather than
include them in the curriculum itself.

The ‘5 a year’ is a minimum level of development for all civil servants. Many
professionals will have CPD requirements over and above this, and if they are
members of a professional body it may be a requirement that they fulfil a certain
level of CPD in order to retain their membership.

**So I have put together our offering into a curriculum, what next?**

You will need to test it with stakeholders, users and your L&D Lead. Like any product
it needs quality assurance, ongoing maintenance and good marketing. You will need
to ensure that there are no unintended overlaps with other professions’ curricula and
the common curriculum. You may need to think about sourcing suppliers, assuring
standards and how you will maintain and evolve the curriculum over time.

Lastly, go back to the original purpose and make sure that the curriculum meets the
criteria you set for it.