



Learning Trajectories in Practice

ECHO tip 93 • July 2020

Centre of Expertise for Higher Education – ECHO (University of Antwerp)

In [ECHO Tip 92](#), we introduced the concept of 'learning trajectories' as an **intermediate level in study programmes** for tracking the gradual acquisition of competences. By focusing on the sequencing of educational activities, learning trajectories allow us to highlight the competence-based approach used in our programmes – always keeping in mind that every student's curriculum must be in line with the core competences of their study programme. (O'Neill, 2013; Wijngaards-de Meij & Merx, 2018).

In this educational tip, we discuss the different steps required to outline a learning trajectory structure within a study programme. This discussion is followed by a series of tips on how to organise efficient learning trajectory consultations, including some examples.

Outlining a learning trajectory structure

Developing a learning trajectory structure within an existing curriculum can be very time-consuming. After all, creating a sufficiently large support base within the study programme is crucial.

We recommend the following steps in order to achieve successful and sustainable results:

- **Define the learning trajectories in mutual consultation.** Work out a proposal with a small group of experts (e.g. the programme coordinator, a few lecturers, an educational expert) and then run it by a larger group of lecturers. Pay special attention to the **names** of the learning trajectories: these should be clear and widely supported by the people involved.
- In some cases, for instance when it looks like a learning trajectory is becoming too broad, it may be useful to define several **sub-trajectories**. However, make sure that the system has a logical structure and does not become too complex. Aim for a maximum of ten learning trajectories, each with no more than three sub-trajectories.
- See if it makes sense to introduce **generic** learning trajectories in addition to **discipline-specific** ones. For instance, there could be a generic learning trajectory encompassing all learning activities aimed at acquiring academic language skills.
- **Appoint a coordinator for each learning trajectory.** Ideally, this role should be fulfilled by one of the lecturers.
- **Outline the tasks** of every learning trajectory coordinator in a framework document. These may include: organising learning trajectory consultations, checking whether the content of the trajectory is in line with the needs of the professional field, managing initiatives which integrate all of the trajectory's various learning objectives, and introducing new lecturers to the learning trajectory.
- **Get formal approval** for the learning trajectory structure. Respect the traditional decision-making and advisory structures within your faculty or department.

- Make sure the trajectory's structure is **communicated properly**. All lecturers, including new ones, should be able to situate their own programme components or educational activities within the system.
- When introducing a **new programme component**, always explicitly mention which learning trajectory it belongs to, and communicate this to everyone involved. Always get confirmation of new links to trajectories via the formal decision-making structures.
- Create a **stable learning trajectory structure**. Avoid frequent changes. Only make changes if there has been a major curriculum change.

Organising learning trajectory consultations

A **learning trajectory consultation** is a forum for sharing, discussing, analysing and coordinating the educational activities within a trajectory or sub-trajectory. Such consultations may be structural or ad hoc. The main objective is to achieve and maintain better coordination between the various educational activities, so as to increase the quality of the study programme. Indirectly, such learning trajectory consultations also result in greater collegiality and better internal cooperation within a department or faculty. After all, they can contribute to lecturers sharing a common philosophy and view of the curriculum. (O'Neill, 2013; Uchiyama & Radin, 2009; Wijngaards-de Meij & Merx, 2018)

Some hands-on tips for the organisation of **efficient learning trajectory consultations**:

- **Set a meeting agenda.** Start from a standardised agenda. Standard agenda items might include 'content', 'learning objectives', 'review' and 'assignments'. This agenda can be supplemented ad hoc with topics from sounding board groups, peer reviews, external review committees, student feedback, etc. A number of education policy spearheads can also be submitted for stock-taking and discussion. Examples of such policy themes are digital and blended learning, sustainability, the education-research nexus, and so on.
- **Use predefined meeting documents.** These documents may include descriptions of the

contents of the various programme components (or educational activities) in the learning trajectory; correlation tables showing the links between programme components and the core competencies of the programme; and an overview of learning objectives, teaching and evaluation methods, and assignments.

- **Enlist the help of a policy officer.** For the preparation and follow-up of learning trajectory consultations, you may benefit from the help of a policy officer who is involved in curriculum management and has insight into the structure of the programme.
- **Have the learning trajectory coordinator lead the consultations.** If possible, organise a brief pre-consultation session between the learning trajectory coordinator and the policy officer.
- **Involve guest lecturers and part-time lecturers as well.** All lecturers directly involved in the contents of the learning trajectory should be invited to the consultations. In the case of teaching assistants (e.g. practicals), it may be advisable to invite only the course unit coordinator.
- **Ensure sufficient coordination between the different learning trajectories.** Programme components or educational activities in a given learning trajectory may build on prior knowledge acquired within another learning trajectory. This information must not be lost. Also be sure to keep track of broader issues that affect several trajectories, by having someone from an overarching advisory or administrative body (e.g. the chair of the Education Committee or Programme Committee) attend the consultations.
- **List all actions to be taken,** distinguishing between short-term and long-term actions. Take these lines of action into account when making curriculum changes. Ensure coordination between the different learning trajectories by discussing the minutes of the learning trajectory consultations at an overarching level.
- **Pursue implementation of learning trajectory consultations throughout the educational entity** (e.g. faculty). Make sure all lecturers are familiar with the system in order to ensure smoother consultations.

- **Use learning trajectory consultations as a sounding board for policies.** Learning trajectory consultations are the ideal forum for introducing certain actions relating to strategic education policies to lecturers. These may include the strengthening of the internationalisation component within a study programme, the structural development of blended learning, or the provision of a good mix of classical and alternative assessment methods.
- **Encourage the sharing of good practices.** This way, learning trajectory consultations can also act as a lever for educational innovation.
- **Beware of meeting fatigue.** Point out the advantages of attending learning trajectory consultations to the participants. Distribute the agenda in advance and stick to the planned meeting duration, but do leave some room in the schedule for people to express their ideas and concerns.

Two examples of a learning trajectory consultation structure at UAntwerp

	Bachelor and Master in Biochemistry and Biotechnology	Bachelor and Master of Applied Economics – Business Administration
Learning trajectories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Biochemistry • Gene • Microorganisms and Immunology • Molecular Working Mechanisms • Dealing with Data • Omics • From Cell to Organism • Academic and Research Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Economics • Economic Analysis • Engineering • Information Systems • Quantitative Methods • Research Methodology • Practice • Broadening • Business Communication <p>(These learning trajectories are further divided into sub-trajectories)</p>
Coordinator	Learning Trajectory Coordinator (Indefinite mandate)	Learning Trajectory Coordinator (Three-year mandate)
Meeting frequency	At least every 3 years Always when there is a major curriculum change	At least every 3 years
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matching core competences to learning objectives, teaching methods and assessment methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matching core competences to learning objectives, teaching methods and assessment methods



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual coordination of learning content + deadlines and design of assignments • Checking the content of the learning trajectory against the needs of the labour market • Additional topics raised in/by sounding board groups, peer review teams and student feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual coordination of learning content + deadlines and design of assignments • Assessing both central and faculty-specific education policy priorities
Support	Support from an education policy officer	Support from an education policy officer
Aligning different learning trajectories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chair or Vice-Chair of the Education Committee attends the learning trajectory consultations • Reporting to the Education Committee • Consultation between the various learning trajectory coordinators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chair or Vice-Chair of the Education Committee attends the learning trajectory consultations • Reporting to the Education Committee
Follow-up of actions to be taken	Follow-up by the learning trajectory coordinator in conjunction with the policy officer	Follow-up by the Education Committee in conjunction with the policy officer
Implementation of the learning trajectory structure	Faculty-wide (all programmes)	Faculty-wide (all programmes)

Want to know more?

D’Andrea, V. & Gosling, D. (2005), *Improving Teaching and Learning In Higher Education: A Whole Institutional Approach*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

O’Neill, G., Donnelly, R., & Fitzmaurice, M. (2014). Supporting programme teams to develop sequencing in higher education curricula. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(4), 268–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2013.867266>

Uchiyama, K. P., & Radin, J. L. (2009). Curriculum mapping in higher education: A vehicle for collaboration. *Innovative Higher Education*, 33(4), 271–280. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-008-9078-8>

Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (ECHO)

35 Venusstraat

B - 2000 Antwerpen

echo@uantwerpen.be

www.uantwerpen.be/echo





Wijngaards-de Meij, L., & Merx, S. (2018). Improving curriculum alignment and achieving learning goals by making the curriculum visible. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23(3), 219-231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2018.1462187>

For tips and potential pitfalls regarding this topic, you can reach out to either of the following contact persons:

- Margo.Abrath@uantwerpen.be (Education Policy Officer, Faculty of Business and Economics, UAntwerp)
- Marleen.Eyckmans@uantwerpen.be (Education Policy Officer, Faculty of Pharmaceutical, Biomedical and Veterinary Sciences, UAntwerp)