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Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Operationalising programmatic assessment through curriculum design: The INSPIRES model

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Programmatic assessment emphasises the use of multiple sources of longitudinal evidence, feedback and holistic academic judgement to support learning and progression. Translating these principles into everyday curriculum design, however, requires teaching teams to coordinate learning, assessment and feedback beyond individual units. This paper introduces INSPIRES; a human-centred curriculum model developed during the design of a new Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) degree. The model comprises eight interconnected, learner-facing domains represented through the INSPIRES acronym. Its human-centred orientation centres the learner journey, guiding academics to consider how students experience and use learning, assessment and feedback across time. Together, the domains guide academics in designing how students engage with and navigate learning, progressively develop capability, use feedback, integrate and reflect on their learning, curate evidence and demonstrate their developing capability. INSPIRES provides a shared language for program teams to plan these elements across a degree while retaining a learner-centred focus. Early use within the course has highlighted practical implementation considerations, including cross-unit coordination, institutional processes and the need for shared understandings among teaching teams. The model is currently in its second semester of use; formal evaluation is planned, so this paper presents its design rationale and early implementation rather than evidence of effectiveness.

*Keywords***:** programmatic assessment, curriculum design, assessment reform, feedback, higher education, human-centred learning

Introduction

Programmatic assessment conceptualises assessment as a longitudinal system in which multiple sources of evidence, rich feedback and informed academic judgement support student learning and progression decisions (Schuwirth & Van Der Vleuten, 2011). This aligns with broader calls to redesign assessment as an integrated process that develops learner capability over time through authentic performance, multiple forms of evidence and human judgement (Lodge et al., 2023; Lodge et al., 2025). The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has intensified questions about what constitutes meaningful evidence of learning in increasingly digital environments (Corbin et al., 2025). These developments expose a curriculum challenge as much as an assessment challenge: programmatic assessment depends on structures that connect learning, feedback and evidence across a degree, enabling assessment to operate as a coherent developmental system (Pedlow & Boud, 2025).

Despite growing consensus around the principles of programmatic assessment, translating these principles into curriculum design remains challenging (Govaerts et al., 2022). The literature identified features such as longitudinal evidence, feedback-rich learning, proportionality and holistic judgement, yet offers less guidance om the everyday design decisions through which teaching teams must enact them across units and semesters (Govaerts et al., 2022; Torre et al., 2022). These decisions include how learning is sequenced, where feedback is positioned, how assessment experiences connect, and how students progressively build and demonstrate capability. Without a practical design framework, programmatic assessment risks being added to existing curriculum structures rather than shaping them. A shared curriculum language can support academics to make these decisions collectively and coherently (Baartman et al., 2022; Pedlow & Boud, 2025).

This paper introduces INSPIRES, a human-centred curriculum model that translates established principles of programmatic assessment into eight interconnected curriculum design domains. Its learner-facing orientation deliberately centres curriculum design on the student's developmental journey, while providing academics

with a shared architecture for making connections between learning, assessment, feedback, reflection, evidence and judgement visible across a degree. In doing so, INSPIRES takes a systems-level approach to human-centred learning design, positioning the learner journey as a programme-level responsibility rather than a feature of individual learning activities.

The INSPIRES model

INSPIRES translates programmatic assessment into a practical curriculum design framework by organising degree-level planning around eight interconnected domains. The domains make visible how students encounter, connect, reflect on and evidence learning, while prompting corresponding design decisions by academics. In this way, the model provides a shared language for designing developmental learning journeys and making their coherence more explicit for students.

The model emerged during curriculum development for a new four-year Bachelor of Nursing (Honours), where individual units were being designed concurrently within a programme adopting programmatic assessment. Although the teaching team shared a commitment to the approach, curriculum development could readily revert to conventional unit boundaries. The team therefore needed a way to move between immediate unit-design decisions and the programme-level learner journey: how capability would develop across time, where feedback could inform subsequent learning, how learning would integrate across contexts, what evidence should accumulate and how students would ultimately demonstrate integrated capability.

The model comprises eight interconnected curriculum design domains that guide academics in planning learning, assessment and feedback within a programmatic assessment architecture (Figure 1). Each domain reflects both a student experience and an associated curriculum design responsibility, prompting academics to consider how learning is intentionally initiated, navigated, scaffolded, supported through feedback, integrated, reflected upon, evidenced and ultimately showcased across the degree (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Fink, 2013).

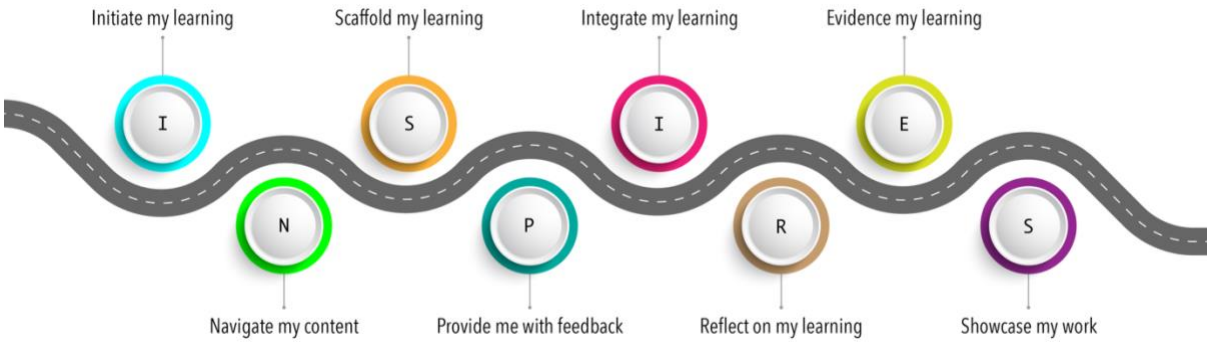


Figure 1
The INSPIRES model as a human-centred curriculum framework for connected learning

The eight domains represent complementary forms of connection that together support coherent, developmental learning as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
The INSPIRES model domains and associated design actions

Domain	Primary connection created
Initiate my learning	Establishes connection with the learning community, expectations and purpose.
Navigate my content	Guides learners with structured pathways through curriculum and available supports.
Scaffold my learning	Builds progressively more complex learning experiences that connect current capability with future performance.
Provide me with feedback	Creates dialogue between current performance and future improvement through iterative feedback processes.

Integrate my learning	Brings together learning across units, disciplines and professional contexts to support transfer and coherence.
Reflect on my learning	Synthesises experiences, feedback and emerging professional identity through structured reflection.
Evidence my learning	Makes visible developing capability through the curation of longitudinal evidence within a portfolio.
Showcase my work	Demonstrates accumulated learning with authentic demonstration of professional capability through the viva.

The eight domains operate as a connected design system rather than independent curriculum components. For example, feedback is designed to inform reflection; reflection contributes to the curation and interpretation of portfolio evidence; portfolio evidence supports mentoring and progression conversations; and the viva enables students to integrate and demonstrate learning across the semester. These relationships create multiple, connected sources of evidence across time, consistent with the core principles of programmatic assessment.

For students, the INSPIRES model makes visible how learning activities, feedback and assessments contribute to degree outcomes and professional capability. For academics, it provides a scaffold for collaborative planning across units and semesters. The shared domains support conversations about sequencing, feedback, assessment, progression and evidence, strengthening both horizontal alignment across units and vertical progression through the degree (Biggs, 2014).

The INSPIRES model does not seek to replace established curriculum design approaches such as constructive alignment or authentic assessment. Rather, it extends these approaches by providing a practical model for operationalising programmatic assessment at the degree level. While constructive alignment supports coherence within individual units, the INSPIRES model focuses on the broader curriculum architecture required to connect learning, assessment, feedback and evidence across an entire degree. In doing so, it bridges the gap between the theoretical principles of programmatic assessment and their practical implementation through curriculum design (Torre et al., 2022).

The significance of curriculum design in an AI-enabled future

As higher education becomes increasingly AI-enabled, robust curriculum design will become even more important in creating coherence across learning, assessment, feedback and evidence. The emergence of GenAI has intensified longstanding questions about what constitutes meaningful evidence of learning and where confidence in student capability should reside. Responses have understandably focused on individual assessment tasks, including their authenticity, security and susceptibility to AI use (Lodge et al., 2025). Yet strengthening individual tasks addresses only part of the problem. When confidence in learning depends heavily on isolated performances, changes in how those performances are produced can destabilise the assessment system itself. GenAI therefore makes visible a broader curriculum design challenge: how can programmes generate confidence in student development through evidence that is accumulated, connected and interpreted across time?

Programmatic assessment offers a different unit of design. Rather than asking each assessment task to independently establish what a student knows or can do, confidence develops through relationships between multiple learning and assessment encounters (Torre & Schuwirth, 2024). Evidence generated at one point can inform feedback, subsequent learning, reflection and later demonstrations of capability. The significance of INSPIRES lies in making these relationships an explicit object of curriculum design. Its domains prompt programme teams to consider not simply what should be assessed, but how capability is scaffolded, where feedback can be used again, how learning is integrated across contexts, what evidence becomes meaningful when viewed longitudinally, and where students have opportunities to synthesise and demonstrate what they have learned.

This distinction becomes particularly important in an AI-enabled environment. A portfolio, viva or authentic assessment is not inherently more trustworthy simply because of its format. Their educational value depends

on the learning and evidence that precede them and the relationships designed between those experiences. Within INSPIRES, for example, Showcase my Work is connected to earlier opportunities to scaffold, integrate, reflect on and evidence learning. The viva therefore becomes more than an alternative to a written assessment: it provides an integrative point at which students draw together learning developed and evidenced across the semester. Similarly, portfolio evidence becomes more than an archive of completed work when students are expected to curate, interpret and reflect on evidence generated through connected learning experiences.

This shifts the response to GenAI away from a search for individual assessment tasks that can establish authenticity on their own. Instead, confidence in capability can be distributed across a deliberately designed programme of learning, feedback, evidence and judgement. Human interaction remains important within this architecture, including dialogue, mentoring, reflection and opportunities to exercise evaluative judgement (Gladovic et al., 2025). Their significance lies in enabling students and educators to interpret development, exercise judgement and determine what should happen next.

For academics, this shift also changes the work of curriculum design. Programme-level assessment requires educators to make decisions collectively across unit boundaries: where capability is introduced and extended, how feedback travels forward, where evidence is revisited, and how individual curriculum decisions contribute to a broader developmental trajectory. Yet institutional structures and academic practice often remain organised around individual units (Spain, 2019). INSPIRES provides a shared language through which teaching teams can undertake this programme-level work. In this sense, its contribution lies in supporting the design of curricula in which confidence in student capability is built across multiple, connected performances over time.

Development and early implementation

Following its initial development, INSPIRES was progressively refined through its use in curriculum design and engagement with scholarship in programmatic assessment, assessment for learning and feedback. The teaching team adopted the model as a shared reference point for programme and unit design, supported by professional learning and visual resources used across curriculum development and the learning management system. INSPIRES is currently in its second semester of use. Early implementation has highlighted several practical considerations, including the coordination required across units and the need to align programme-level intentions with existing institutional processes. For example, operationalising holistic progression decisions required the establishment of a Course Progression Panel to triangulate learner data and make progression recommendations to the School Board of Examiners for ratification. Formal evaluation has not yet been undertaken; these observations therefore reflect implementation experience rather than evidence of effectiveness. Ethics approval has been obtained for the planned evaluation of INSPIRES (HREC: 2026/ET000131), which will examine how educators use the model and the conditions that support or constrain its enactment.

Conclusion

Programmatic assessment requires more than changing individual assessment tasks. It also requires curriculum decisions that help students encounter learning, feedback and assessment as connected parts of their development. INSPIRES offers programme teams a practical structure for considering these decisions through eight learner-facing domains and for discussing how unit-level choices contribute to the wider degree. The model remains at an early stage of implementation within one undergraduate nursing programme. Its current value is therefore presented as a curriculum design contribution, not as evidence of effectiveness. Early use has identified practical issues that warrant continued attention, including cross-unit coordination, institutional processes and sustainable ways of supporting shared programme-level practice. Evaluation with educators, and later with students, will be important in determining how the model is used, where it requires refinement and whether it is useful in other disciplinary and institutional contexts. As higher education becomes increasingly AI-enabled, INSPIRES demonstrates how a systems-level approach to human-centred learning design can keep the learner’s developmental journey at the centre of programme-level curriculum and assessment design.

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