Determining Inherent Course Requirements

What are inherent requirements?

Inherent requirements are those that students must demonstrate in order to complete a course/unit/program. They are requirements which would substantially impact on course learning outcomes if removed or substituted. 

For example: the requirement that a student complete specified practicum subjects/units in order to qualify for an Education degree or the requirement that a student demonstrate the ability to perform drug calculations accurately in order to pass a unit of a Nursing degree.

How are inherent requirements determined?

In determining the requirements for a course/unit it is important to be clear about the key learning objectives and how students will demonstrate achievement of these learning objectives. It is also useful to clarify whether the course/unit uses any particular methods of instruction (e.g. participation in an online task or fieldwork); forms of assessment (e.g. formal examinations); or has any other requirements (e.g. attendance requirements).

Questions which may assist in identifying which course requirements are inherent include:

1. Would the learning outcomes be substantially changed if a particular requirement were removed or substituted?

2. Is there any particular impact of the requirement on certain groups of students (e.g. participation in field trips may be more difficult for a student who uses a wheelchair, completing fieldwork full time may be a challenge for students with carer responsibilities)?

3. Have changing circumstances, practices or technology made a previous requirement redundant? (e.g. the capacity to physically lift a patient is no longer required by nurses, due to no lift policies and lifting aids; the requirement to have a drivers licence is no longer universal due to online / tele services).

4. Could the learning outcome be achieved by an alternative? (e.g. Could students complete an oral exam rather than a written paper to demonstrate their knowledge of a topic?)

5. What is the pedagogical purpose behind a particular requirement, how does it achieve that purpose and are there other ways of achieving this? (e.g. Are examinations the best or only method to assess particular learning outcomes?)

6. If a requirement involves a particular skill, is it the actual skill that is required or is it the application of knowledge to the task? (e.g. Is it necessary for a chemist to conduct an experimental procedure rather than have the knowledge to instruct another person to do so?).

7. Are there alternative ways that students could demonstrate that they meet the learning outcomes? (e.g. time limited exams require students to work under pressure in addition to them demonstrating their knowledge).
For example: One of the skills required in a course may be for a student to be able to examine a specimen, describe and identify it. As a lecturer you may decide that this should be an inherent learning outcome for the course. Let us work through some of the questions above to better understand the requirement:

- As the requirement is currently stated, the outcome is that the student needs to be able to see and describe the specimen as well as identify it. A student who has a severe vision impairment may not be able to see enough detail in the specimen to be able to identify it and therefore this requirement will be more difficult for them to meet.

- It may be that changing technology or practices means that the emphasis is now more on specimen identification. You may then decide on reflection that the inherent requirement is actually the capacity of the student to identify a specimen and make decisions based on that.

- If this is the case, the student with vision impairment may be able to demonstrate their competence in identification of the specimen based on a description by another person. The decision would also need to be made about whether there was a need for the identification to be made within time constraints.

- A reasonable accommodation of this student’s needs may be the provision of an aide to describe the specimen. A more inclusive (and cost effective approach) may be to have students work in pairs and could have the added benefit of improving the standard of students’ specimen descriptions.

- If the requirement for being able to see and describe the specimen is set by the registration body it may be that the university may choose to require the identification competence.

- Of course the purpose behind this requirement will vary depending on the nature of the course. For instance in medicine, the context may be a surgical procedure and the requirement to see the specimen clearly and describe it in order to make decisions around treatment may be critical. In this case, the inherent requirement may be seen as reasonable even though the student with the vision impairment may not be able to meet it.

The inherent requirements of a unit/course, are a matter of academic judgement, and must be justified on academic grounds other than historical or employment-based grounds. Inherent requirements must be reasonable and staff should carefully consider whether alternative approaches to achieving learning objectives are possible and seek expert advice if necessary before coming to a decision.

Requirements imposed by external agencies (e.g. professional bodies, registration boards, external fieldwork agencies, etc.) can only be considered as inherent requirements if they are also considered by the University as essential to the academic program itself.

Equity and Diversity Unit

Revised by Danielle Hitch December 2014