Good Course Design Reduces the Burden on Educators: Lessons from the Redesign of a Specialist Crime Topic

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Good Course Design Reduces the Burden on Educators:

Lessons from the Redesign of a Specialist Crime Topic

Craig Collins and Bianca Paterson

Leo Cussen Centre for Law

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between learning design and educator workload through the rapid redesign of an online specialist Crime topic within a practical legal education program. The existing topic relied heavily on advanced simulation and a complex factual scenario. Rather than simply replace that scenario, the redesign adopted a more structured, scaffolded and workflow-based approach in which students progressively acquired relevant knowledge, observed competent performance, practised component skills and applied those capabilities in increasingly authentic professional tasks. The study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods case study design, drawing on a survey of 19 students, two external validation exercises and practice-based observations from educators involved in delivery.

Students generally experienced the redesigned topic as clear, structured, confidence-building and professionally relevant. Educators also reported reduced preparation requirements, fewer clarification questions during delivery, less feedback directed to basic task misunderstanding, and greater consistency in student work. These educator observations were not collected through a prospective workload study and are therefore treated as exploratory. The paper develops the concept of compensatory teaching load: instructional work educators must perform because orientation, sequencing, modelling or task expectations are insufficiently carried by the student-facing learning environment. It argues that good design does not remove the educator; it can shift routine explanatory work into the course architecture and release educator time for judgement-rich teaching, professional discussion and individualised feedback. The case therefore suggests that educator workload may provide an additional lens through which learning-design quality can be evaluated.

1. Introduction

Online legal education creates a difficult design problem. Students need legal knowledge, process awareness, practical skills and professional judgement, but these cannot be developed through content delivery alone. Research on instructional guidance and worked examples indicates that novices require explicit structure, modelling and supported practice before they can manage complex performance effectively.[1] Nor is it enough to place students directly into complex simulations and assume that capability will follow. The redesigned Crime topic was based on a different view: students should first be oriented to the legal and professional context, shown how tasks are performed, supported to practise key parts, and then asked to apply their learning in more realistic settings.

This paper evaluates that redesign through two connected lenses. The first is the student-facing learning architecture: whether sequencing, scaffolding, workflow and practice made learning clearer and more professionally meaningful. The second is educator delivery burden: whether clearer materials reduced the need for lecturers to repeatedly reconstruct the learning pathway through preparation, explanation, task clarification and corrective feedback. The paper does not claim measurable gains in competence or a proven causal reduction in workload. It asks whether the available evidence supports these propositions strongly enough to justify further testing.

2. Context of the redesign

The redesign took place in difficult circumstances. Concerns had been raised about content in the existing unit, so the immediate task was remediation. The project was therefore not a controlled research experiment. It was a natural **course redesign and quality-improvement case study** conducted under time pressure. That context shaped the project. Time for formal analysis, piloting and evaluation was limited. Even so, the remediation work created an opportunity to rethink the learning design, not simply replace problematic materials.

[1] Paul A Kirschner, John Sweller and Richard E Clark, 'Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching' (2006) 41(2) Educational Psychologist 75, 75–83; John Sweller and Graham A Cooper, 'The Use of Worked Examples as a Substitute for Problem Solving in Learning Algebra' (1985) 2(1) Cognition and Instruction 59, 59–66, 83–7.

The design team treated the unit as more than a store of criminal law information. It asked how students should move through the material, how doctrine connected with professional process, and how each lesson prepared students for later legal tasks.

> How should students be guided from legal knowledge to legal reasoning, legal task performance and professionally defensible judgement?

The redesigned unit was reviewed through four sources of evidence:

1. an external pedagogical validation by a higher education teaching and learning specialist;
2. a practice-facing review by an external legal education design team; and
3. a student survey focused on the learning architecture of the unit.
4. practice-based observations from educators involved in delivering the redesigned topic.

The institutions named in the source report are anonymised here. The reviews are referred to as **Validation Report A** and **Validation Report B**.

3. Research question and study aims

The paper uses the following research question:

> How did a scaffolded, workflow-based redesign of a specialist Crime topic affect students' experience of learning and the teaching, guidance and feedback burden experienced by educators, and what does the case suggest about educator workload as an indicator of learning-design quality?

Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis:

1. To what extent did students experience the redesigned learning architecture—including pathway visibility, scaffolding, sequencing and workflow—as clear and coherent?
2. What changes did educators observe in preparation, student questioning, guidance, feedback requirements and the consistency of student work?
3. What do the student, educator and external-review evidence suggest about educator workload as an additional lens for evaluating course-design quality?

The study has four aims: to explain the design method, examine student responses, incorporate educator delivery observations alongside external validation, and identify improvements needed before the approach is scaled or tested more formally. It is

exploratory: it assesses the visibility and practical effects of the design model rather than claiming experimental proof of superior learning or reduced workload.

4. Conceptual framework: capability formation and educator workload

4.1 Beyond information transmission

A content-centred model usually begins with topics to be covered. That may communicate information, but it does not show how students will learn to use that information in legal work.

Legal capability requires more than knowing rules. Students must identify facts, frame issues, choose processes, organise information, produce legal work, communicate clearly and justify their conclusions. The Crime unit treated capability as something formed over time through scaffolded participation: students were introduced to knowledge, shown its professional context, given models, supported to practise and then asked to apply their learning. This progression is consistent with research on scaffolding and instructional guidance, which suggests that learners need structured support before they can manage the full complexity of professional performance.[2]

4.2 Simulation and preparedness

Advanced simulation can integrate many parts of legal work: instructions, law, evidence, procedure, client communication, ethics and written outputs. For novices, however, these demands can arrive simultaneously and place heavy demands on working memory. Without sufficient preparation, students may imitate the visible features of a task without understanding the reasoning, standards or professional choices that underpin it. Research on cognitive load, worked examples and legal simulation therefore supports sequencing modelling and guided practice before students undertake demanding integrated performance.[3]

The redesigned unit did not reject simulation. It placed simulation later, after students had developed the knowledge, task awareness and workflow understanding needed to

[2] David Wood, Jerome S Bruner and Gail Ross, 'The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving' (1976) 17(2) Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 89, 90–6; Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (n 1) 75–9.
[3] John Sweller, 'Cognitive Load Theory, Learning Difficulty, and Instructional Design' (1994) 4(4) Learning and Instruction 295, 295–304; Sweller and Cooper (n 1) 59–66; Paul Maharg and Emma Nicol, 'Simulation and Technology in Legal Education: A Systematic Review' in Caroline Strevens, Richard Grimes and Edward Phillips (eds), Legal Education: Simulation in Theory and Practice (Ashgate, 2014) 17, 17–24.

use it well. The model is therefore not instruction instead of simulation. It is **instruction, modelling and practice** before more demanding performance.[4]

4.3 Workflow-based legal education

A workflow shows how professional work moves from one step to the next: what starts a task, what information is needed, what decisions must be made, what action follows and what record or deliverable is produced. By making this structure visible, workflow-based learning helps bridge the gap between knowing a legal rule and knowing what a lawyer should do in a matter. This emphasis is consistent with Australian legal education scholarship that calls for stronger integration of doctrinal knowledge, professional capability and the processes through which legal work is performed.[5]

In the Crime unit, lessons were organised around the progress of legal matters and the tasks a lawyer might perform. This did not reduce practice to a checklist. A workflow gives structure, but professional judgement remains necessary because facts, duties and available choices can vary.

4.4 Cognitive capability sequencing as an explanatory lens

The redesign can be explained through a sequence that brings together several established principles of learning: orientation and explanation make purpose and foundational knowledge visible; modelling and guided practice support initial performance; retrieval strengthens access to prior learning; feedback and reflection support revision; and transfer tests whether learning can be used in a changed context. The sequence is expressed in this paper as follows:[6]

Orient → Explain → Model → Practise → Retrieve → Perform → Feedback → Reflect → Transfer[7]

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[4] M David Merrill, 'First Principles of Instruction' (2002) 50(3) *Educational Technology Research and Development* 43, 44–5, 50–2; Sweller and Cooper (n 2) 83–7.

[5] Sally Kift and Kana Nakano, Reimagining the Professional Regulation of Australian Legal Education (Council of Australian Law Deans, 1 December 2021) 74–80, 91–5.

[6] M David Merrill, 'First Principles of Instruction' (2002) 50(3) Educational Technology Research and Development 43, 44–5, 50–2; Henry L Roediger III and Jeffrey D Karpicke, 'Test-Enhanced Learning: Taking Memory Tests Improves Long-Term Retention' (2006) 17(3) Psychological Science 249, 249–55; John Hattie and Helen Timperley, 'The Power of Feedback' (2007) 77(1) Review of Educational Research 81, 86–90; Susan M Barnett and Stephen J Ceci, 'When and Where Do We Apply What We Learn? A Taxonomy for Far Transfer' (2002) 128(4) Psychological Bulletin 612, 612–16.

[7] See generally Merrill (n 5) 44–5, 50–2; Henry L Roediger III and Jeffrey D Karpicke, 'Test-Enhanced Learning: Taking Memory Tests Improves Long-Term Retention' (2006) 17(3) *Psychological Science* 249, 249–55; John Hattie and Helen Timperley, 'The Power of Feedback' (2007) 77(1) *Review of Educational*

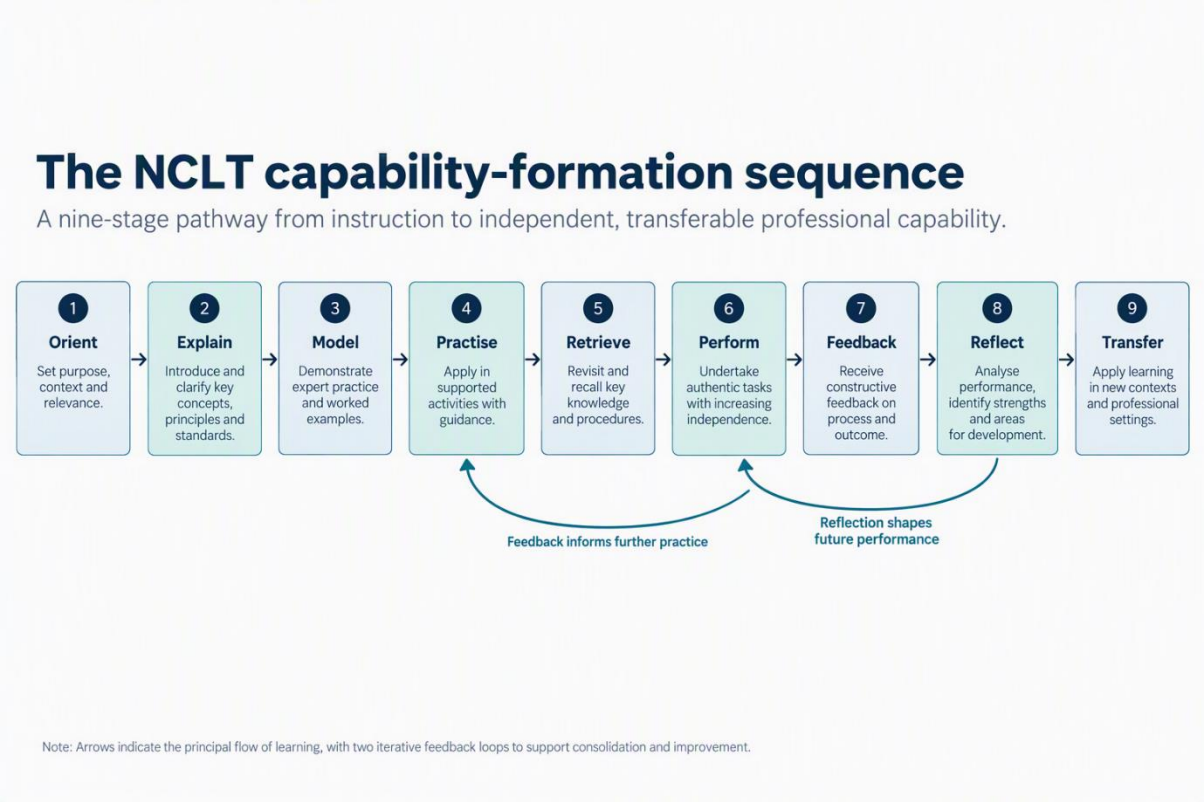


Figure 1. The NCLT capability-formation sequence. Feedback loops show that the model is iterative rather than strictly linear.

This paper describes the sequence as the NCLT framework. It separates stages of learning that are often compressed into one activity.

Orient establishes the matter, learning purpose, professional context and expected journey. In the Crime unit, the course map and narrative structure were intended to perform this function.

Explain introduces the legal concepts, procedures, vocabulary and task requirements necessary for participation.

Model shows how a legal task or reasoning process is performed. Models may include worked examples, annotated documents, demonstrations or explanations of expert decision-making.[8]

Research 81, 86–90; Susan M Barnett and Stephen J Ceci, 'When and Where Do We Apply What We Learn? A Taxonomy for Far Transfer' (2002) 128(4) *Psychological Bulletin* 612, 612–16.

[8] Sweller and Cooper (n 2) 59–66, 83–7.

Practise allows students to attempt component parts of the task with structure and support.[9]

Retrieve requires students to recall and reorganise prior learning rather than merely reread it. Retrieval may occur through checkpoints, short questions, classification tasks or reapplication of concepts.[10][11]

Perform asks students to integrate learning in a more complete and authentic professional task.

Feedback helps students compare their approach with expected standards, identify misconceptions and revise their performance.[12][13]

Reflect requires students to consider how they approached the task, what influenced their decisions and what they would change.

Transfer tests whether learning can be used in a changed context, a new factual setting or a later professional task.[14][15]

The Crime unit moved towards this sequence, but not every element was fully developed. External reviewers recommended clearer signposting, more worked examples and better preparation before complex tasks. The framework is therefore best used to explain the intended learning movement and to identify where the prototype still needs work.

4.5 Student-facing learning architecture and compensatory teaching load

Course design affects not only what students experience but also what educators must do during delivery. Where orientation, task purpose, sequencing, professional context or expected performance remain implicit, lecturers may repeatedly supply that missing structure through explanation, emails, class-time clarification and corrective feedback. This paper describes that avoidable instructional repair as compensatory teaching load.

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[9] Sally Kift and Rachael Field, 'Intentional First Year Curriculum Design as a Means of Facilitating Student Engagement: Some Exemplars' (2009) 12(2) Legal Education Review 23.
[10] Roediger and Karpicke (n 7) 249–55.
[11] Michael Coper, 'Law Reform and Legal Education: Uniting Separate Worlds' (2013) 23(1) Legal Education Review 3.
[12] Hattie and Timperley (n 7) 86–90, 102–5.
[13] Nickolas James, 'A Brief History of Critique in Australian Legal Education' (2000) 24(3) Melbourne University Law Review 965.
[14] Barnett and Ceci (n 7) 612–16, 621–6.
[15] Margaret Castles, 'Challenges to the Academy: Reflections on the Teaching of Legal Ethics in Australia' (2001) 12(1) Legal Education Review 81.

The distinction is not between educator involvement and no educator involvement. Professional education depends on expert questioning, judgement and feedback. The relevant distinction is between high-value interaction and work required because the learning environment has left students to decode basic expectations. The NCLT sequence provides a mechanism for shifting some of that work upstream: orientation and explanation reduce ambiguity; modelling and guided practice make standards visible; and preparation before performance can reduce later remediation. Good design may therefore change the character, not simply the quantity, of educator work.

5. The redesigned Crime unit as a teaching intervention

The paper's contribution lies in connecting two bodies of literature that are usually discussed separately. Learning-design research explains how orientation, modelling, practice and transparent task expectations support learners. Workload research examines the time and activities involved in teaching online. The concept of compensatory teaching load links these perspectives by proposing that some recurrent educator work is generated when essential instructional structure remains implicit in student-facing materials.

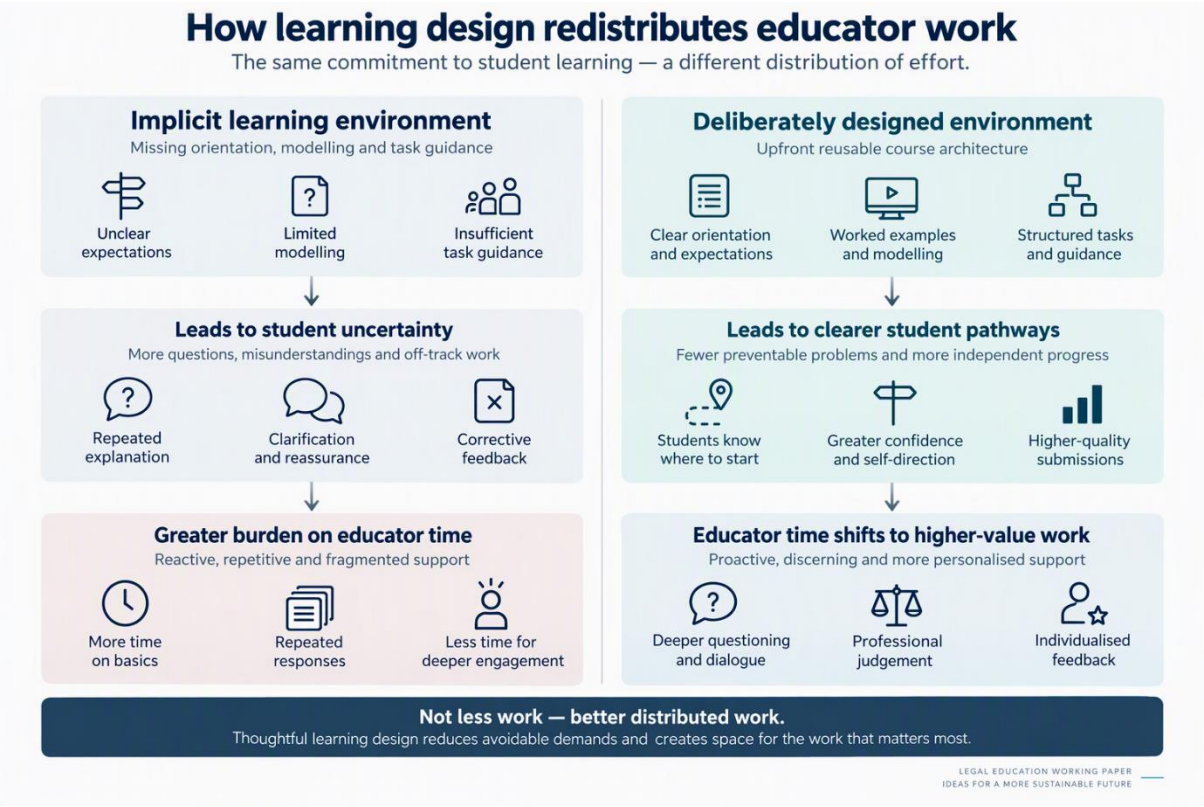


Figure 2. How learning design redistributes educator work from recurrent instructional repair towards higher-value professional teaching.

The unit's main innovation was architectural rather than technological. It did not depend on a new platform or immersive tool. It reorganised the way students moved through the learning experience. The redesigned approach had six main features.

First, the unit sought to make the learning pathway visible. Students were shown how individual elements connected and how earlier work prepared them for later application. This was intended to reduce the need for students to infer the structure of the unit independently.[16]

Secondly, content was divided into more manageable conceptual and task-based stages. This did not necessarily mean reducing intellectual complexity. It meant controlling when complexity was introduced and giving students structures through which to organise it.[17]

Thirdly, the unit used narrative continuity. Rather than presenting criminal law activities as unrelated exercises, it allowed students to follow matters, decisions and consequences through a connected sequence.

Fourthly, activities were attached to professional tasks, workflows and deliverables. Students were asked not only to know something but to understand what a lawyer would do with that knowledge.

Fifthly, practice was positioned as part of learning rather than merely as a final test. Students encountered structured opportunities to apply concepts before more demanding performance.[18]

Finally, the redesigned architecture created a clearer basis for academic quality review. Reviewers could examine not just the accuracy of the content but the intended progression from learning outcomes through instruction, practice and performance.

These elements align with a broader capability-formation model:

Knowledge formation → workflow orientation → observation of performance → guided component practice → integrated application → feedback and reflection → transfer

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[16] Bart Rienties and Lisette Toetenel, 'The Impact of Learning Design on Student Behaviour, Satisfaction and Performance: A Cross-Institutional Comparison across 151 Modules' (2016) 60 *Computers in Human Behavior* 333, 333–6.
[17] John Sweller, 'Cognitive Load Theory, Learning Difficulty, and Instructional Design' (1994) 4(4) *Learning and Instruction* 295, 295–304.
[18] Linda Kam et al, 'Get Real! A Case Study of Authentic Learning Activities in Legal Education' (2012) 19(1) *Murdoch University Law Review* 103, 103–10; Toni Collins, 'Authentic Assessment — The Right Choice for Students Studying Law?' (2022) 32(1) *Legal Education Review* 1, 1–7.

The design remained a prototype. External review showed that the overall direction was sound, but that students needed clearer transitions, more modelling and stronger preparation for complex work.

5.1 Moving instructional work into the student-facing materials

The redesign increasingly placed orientation, sequencing and task guidance in the learning materials themselves. Course mapping explained where students were going; narrative and workflow located activities within the legal matter; models and structured practice clarified what competent performance required. In this sense, the redesign redistributed instructional work. The educator remained essential, but less of the basic connective work depended on an educator being present to explain how the course fitted together.

6. Method

6.1 Study design

The study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods case study design. The case is the redesigned online Crime topic. It combines student perception data, two external validation exercises and retrospective practice-based observations from educators involved in delivery. The survey provides descriptive data, the external reports provide evaluative feedback, and the educator observations provide preliminary evidence about delivery burden. Used together, these sources permit triangulation through convergence, complementarity and tension, while preserving the distinction between student perceptions, external judgements and educator observations.[19]

6.2 Data sources

[19] Jennifer C Greene, Valerie J Caracelli and Wendy F Graham, 'Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs' (1989) 11(3) Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 255, 255–60.

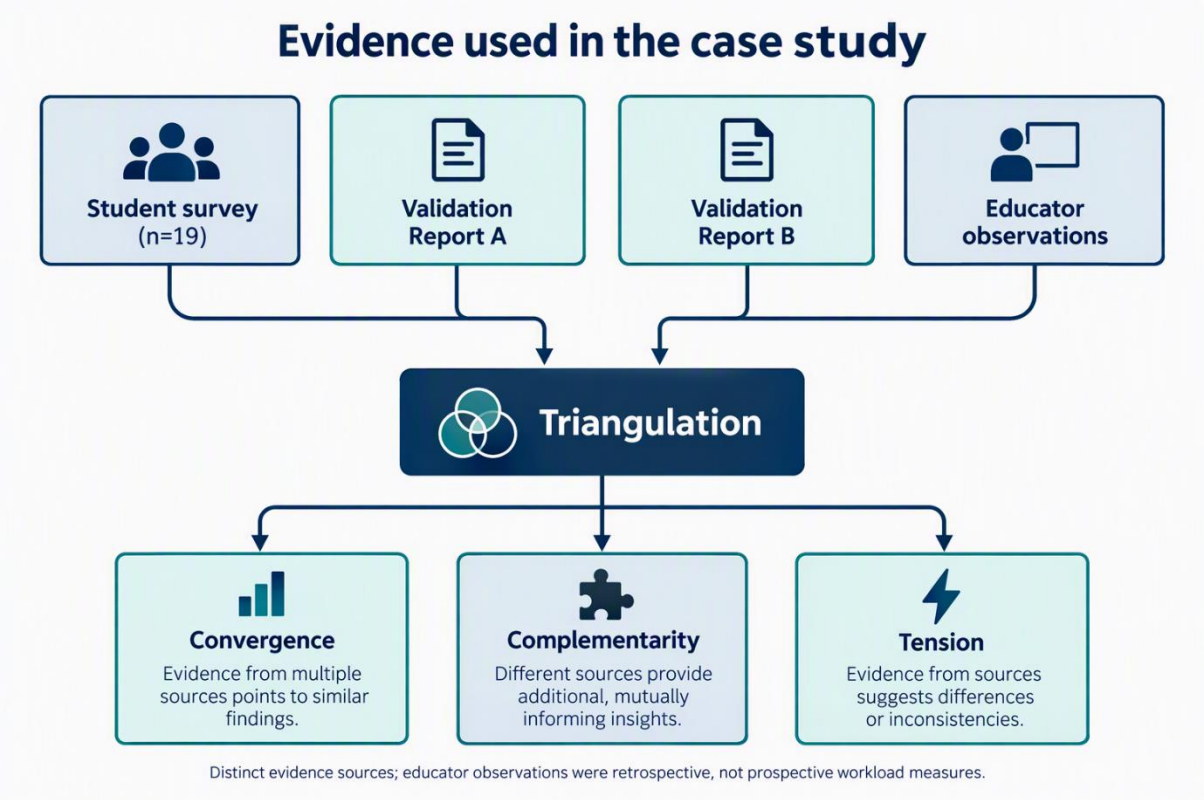


Figure 3. Evidence used in the case study and its treatment through convergence, complementarity and tension.

Four data sources were used. The first was a student survey completed by 19 respondents. The survey contained seven core items aligned with the learning design objectives. The questions tested:

- clarity of the learning pathway;
- visibility of workflows and frameworks;
- effectiveness of the step-by-step approach;
- connection between lessons and the overall matter;
- understanding of legal action in a criminal law context;
- confidence developed through practice activities; and
- comparative perceptions of professional skills development.

Additional survey items were reportedly included to reduce the obviousness of the evaluative focus or mitigate demand effects. Those items are not included in the source report and are therefore not analysed here.

The second source, Validation Report A, was prepared by an external higher education teaching and learning specialist. The review examined the contemporary pedagogical basis of the unit, the credibility of the design direction and the extent to which the learning architecture could support academic quality assurance.

The third source, Validation Report B, was produced by an external legal education design team. It focused more strongly on learner experience, professional relevance, narrative, intuitive sequencing and transferability to early-career lawyer education.

The fourth source consisted of retrospective observations from educators involved in delivery. These concerned preparation requirements, the nature and frequency of student questions, guidance required during activities, feedback demands and perceived consistency in student work. The observations were not collected through a formal time-and-motion or workload instrument and are therefore treated as exploratory implementation evidence rather than quantitative proof of workload reduction.

This paper relies on summaries of the two validation reports rather than independent coding of the full reports. The educator observations were also collected retrospectively. These limitations are reflected in the cautious interpretation adopted below.

6.3 Survey analysis

Student responses were analysed descriptively. Percentages were converted into approximate counts based on 19 responses, and agreement and strong agreement were combined to show overall positive response levels. No inferential statistical testing was undertaken. With 19 respondents, inferential analysis would have limited value, particularly in the absence of a pre-intervention measure, control group or matched comparator cohort. The survey results are treated as evidence of student perceptions, not direct evidence of learning gain or professional competence.

6.4 Qualitative analysis of validation feedback

The validation feedback was analysed against the intended design model, including course orientation, sequencing, modelling, workflow, practice, engagement, transfer and quality assurance.

- course orientation and pathway visibility;
- sequencing and scaffolding;
- modelling and worked examples;
- workflow and professional context;
- practice and preparation for performance;
- learner engagement;
- transferability;
- academic quality and evidence of intentional design.

The analysis considered both positive comments and cautions. This was important because the purpose was improvement, not validation alone.

6.5 Triangulation

Convergence occurred where students, educators and reviewers identified related effects—for example, student pathway clarity alongside reduced need for delivery-time clarification. Complementarity occurred where external reviewers explained why a student or educator experience might matter educationally. Tension occurred where students were positive overall but reviewers still identified gaps in modelling, signposting and preparation. This combination is useful because a unit can be well received, easier to deliver and still require substantial refinement.[20]

6.6 Ethics and research governance

The source material does not state whether the student survey was conducted under formal research ethics approval, a quality-assurance exemption or ordinary course evaluation arrangements. That status should be confirmed before the paper is circulated externally or submitted for publication. A final research version should document:

- the purpose communicated to students;
- whether participation was voluntary;
- whether responses were anonymous;
- whether students consented to research use;
- how data were stored;
- whether the evaluation was approved or exempted by the relevant ethics process; and
- whether any power relationship existed between the evaluators and respondents.

The present draft treats the data as internal quality-improvement evidence and anonymises the external reviewers.

7. Data analysis and findings

7.1 Student survey results

The student survey results are summarised below.

[20] Greene, Caracelli and Graham (n 19) 258–60, 267–9.

Evaluated design feature	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Positive response
Learning pathway clear from outset	42.1%	47.4%	0%	10.5%	0%	**89.5%**
Workflows and structured tasks improved understanding	42.1%	31.6%	0%	26.3%	0%	**73.7%**
Step-by-step approach supported learning	47.4%	31.6%	10.5%	10.5%	0%	**79.0%**
Workflow showed how lessons connected	47.4%	31.6%	5.3%	15.8%	0%	**79.0%**
Modules improved understanding of acting for a client	47.4%	42.1%	0%	5.3%	5.3%	**89.5%**
Practice activities built confidence	52.6%	36.8%	0%	10.5%	0%	**89.4%**
Stronger sense of developing usable professional skills	47.4%	15.8%	31.6%	5.3%	0%	**63.2%**

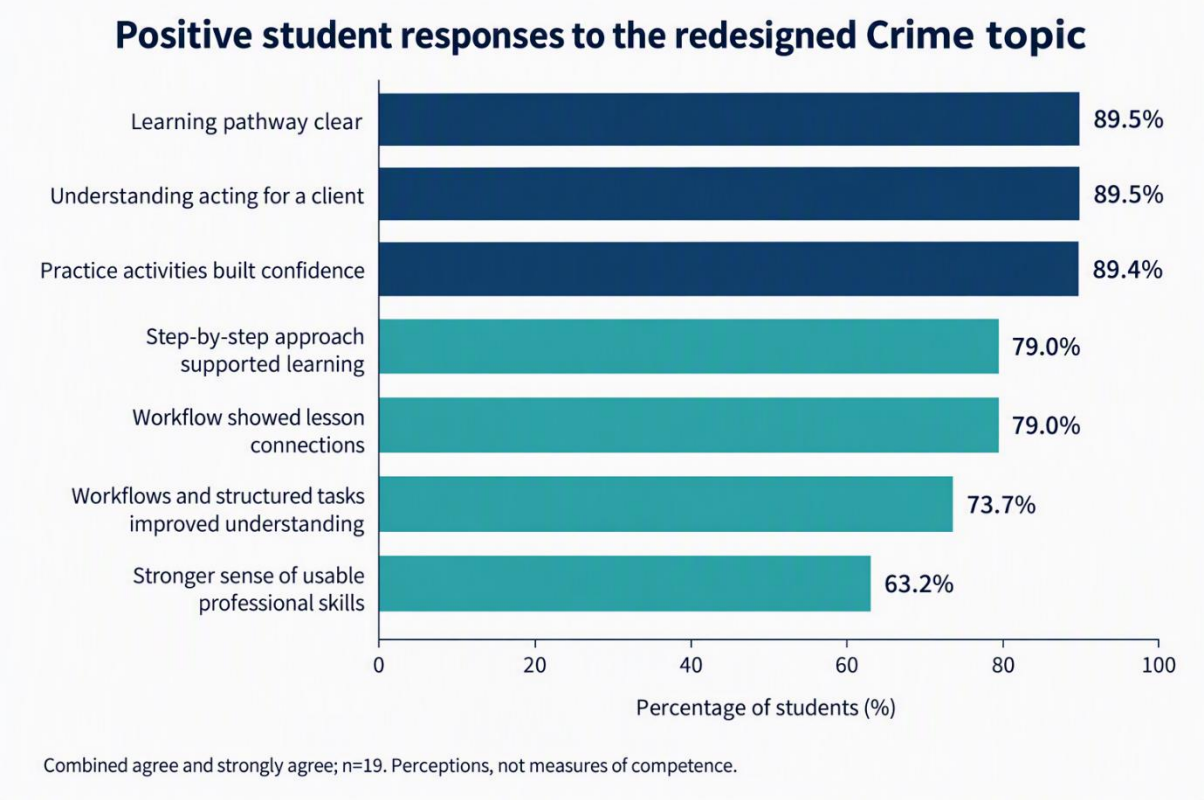


Figure 4. Positive student responses to the redesigned Crime topic. Combined agree and strongly agree; n = 19. Results report perceptions, not competence.

The strongest results related to pathway clarity, understanding how to act for a client, and confidence from practice. Each received positive responses from about 89 per cent of students. This suggests that most students recognised the structure of the redesign rather than experiencing the unit simply as a set of disconnected online resources. The confidence result should nevertheless be interpreted carefully. Research comparing learner self-assessment with objective performance shows that perceived confidence and demonstrated competence are related but distinct constructs.[21] Confidence remains educationally relevant when it reflects better task understanding and greater readiness to attempt difficult work, but it cannot substitute for direct evidence of performance.

The workflow and sequencing measures were positive but less uniform. Approximately 74 per cent agreed that workflows, frameworks and structured tasks improved their understanding, while 26.3 per cent disagreed. Similarly, 79 per cent agreed that the workflow helped them understand how lessons connected, but 15.8 per cent disagreed and 5.3 per cent were neutral.

These results show that the workflow model helped many students but was not clear to everyone. This supports the reviewer's recommendation for clearer workflows and stronger signposting between stages. The comparative professional-skills item produced the most cautious result. Although 63.2 per cent agreed that the Crime unit provided a stronger sense of developing usable professional skills than another elective, 31.6 per cent selected the neutral response.

Students were more willing to endorse immediate features, such as clarity and confidence, than to make a broad comparison about professional skill development. This is not a failure of the model. It shows that stronger claims about professional capability need stronger evidence than a perception survey can provide.

7.2 Validation Report A: external pedagogical review

Validation Report A broadly supported the design direction. The reviewer saw the unit as coherent and contemporary because it moved away from passive content delivery and unsupported complexity. The reviewer also saw value for academic quality assurance. The unit made the links between content, activities, progression, outcomes and performance more visible. The validation was developmental rather than unqualified. Five improvement priorities were identified.

[21] Taylor Gabbard and Frank Romanelli, 'The Accuracy of Health Professions Students' Self-Assessments Compared to Objective Measures of Competence' (2021) 85(4) American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education 8405, 1–6.

First, the overall course map should be made more explicit at the beginning of the unit. Students should be able to see the complete journey and understand how each stage contributes to later performance.

Secondly, transitions between stages should be signposted more clearly. Students should know whether they are currently acquiring concepts, observing a model, practising a component skill, performing a professional task or consolidating learning.

Thirdly, additional worked examples and annotated models should be provided before complex deliverables are required.

Fourthly, each activity should be located more visibly within a legal workflow. Students should understand both the task and its professional position.

Finally, complex applied work should be preceded by sufficient instructional support, demonstration and guided practice.

These recommendations show that the redesign had a sound direction, but that some stages of the learning sequence still needed to be made clearer and more complete.

7.3 Validation Report B: practice-facing legal education review

Validation Report B focused on the practical and professional dimensions of the unit. The reviewers responded positively to the narrative structure and to the way the legal matter developed through connected activities. Narrative helped students see how information, decisions and tasks related over time. It supported the idea that legal work is a process, not a series of isolated outputs.

The reviewers also saw a strong connection with early-career lawyer capability, especially the move from knowing law to taking legal action, understanding workflow and producing defensible work. The learning pathway was described as intuitive and transferable. The reviewers considered elements of the approach potentially useful in their own professional training environment. This provides evidence that the model may have relevance beyond the immediate unit.

This finding should be treated cautiously. The source report notes that the reviewing team's interest in future collaboration may have shaped its enthusiasm.

7.4 Educator experience and delivery burden

Educators involved in delivery reported benefits extending beyond the student experience. They described lower preparation requirements, fewer questions seeking

clarification of what students were required to do, and less time spent correcting basic misunderstandings of task purpose or expected deliverables. They also perceived greater consistency in the work students produced. These observations align with the student results: 89.5 per cent reported a clear learning pathway, and approximately 79 per cent considered the workflow helpful in showing how lessons connected.

The strongest interpretation is not that lecturers became less important. Rather, clearer student-facing materials appeared to reduce the amount of delivery-time instructional repair required to make the topic function. The evidence is preliminary because educator time and question frequency were not prospectively measured, but it generates a testable proposition: some teaching workload may be a downstream consequence of learning-design ambiguity.

7.5 Triangulated findings

The four data sources converge around five principal findings.

First, the design made the learning pathway more visible. Students reported strong pathway clarity, while both external reviews recognised structured progression.

Second, the design supported professional orientation. Students associated the unit with understanding how to act for a client, and the practice-facing reviewers recognised the relationship between legal knowledge, workflow and professional production.

Third, structured practice appears to have contributed to confidence. This aligns with the pedagogical reviewer's support for progressive preparation before complex performance.

Fourth, the model remains incomplete. The student disagreement on workflow items and the external recommendations concerning signposting, modelling and task preparation point in the same direction. The architecture was promising, but some learners were still required to infer connections that should have been more explicitly designed.

Fifth, the same features that increased learner clarity may also have reduced compensatory educator intervention. The alignment between student perceptions and educator observations does not establish causation, but it supports further investigation of workload as a design-quality indicator.

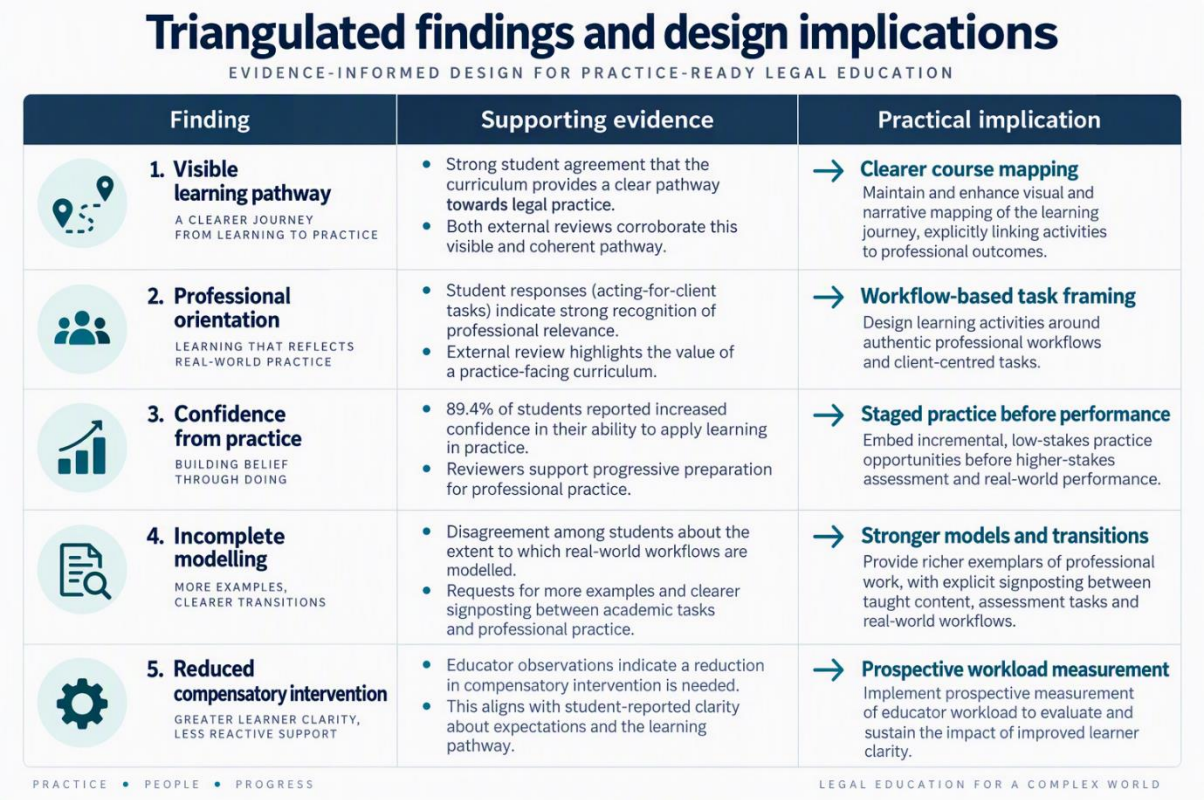


Figure 5. Triangulated findings, supporting evidence and practical design implications.

8. Discussion

8.1 The significance of visible learning architecture

The main contribution of the redesigned Crime unit is that it made learning more visible. Students were given a pathway, a developing legal matter and activities linked to professional purposes. This matters in online education. Students cannot always rely on a teacher to explain how each part connects. The course design itself must do more of that orienting work.

A visible structure also helps students manage their own learning. They can see what they have done, what remains difficult and how current work prepares them for later performance.

8.2 Sequencing and the role of simulation

The evaluation supports better sequencing, not less simulation. Authentic tasks remain important. The key question is when students are ready for them.

A simulation-first approach can expose students to realistic work before they have the frameworks needed to understand it. The redesigned model tried to build those

frameworks first. The NCLT sequence helps explain this movement. Orientation and explanation reduce ambiguity. Models make standards visible. Guided practice allows students to isolate components. Retrieval strengthens access to prior learning. Integrated performance then asks students to coordinate those elements.

External feedback shows that the unit moved in the right direction but needs further work. The next version should focus less on adding activities and more on making sure each complex task is properly prepared for.

8.3 Workflow as a bridge between knowledge and action

The workflow approach helped connect criminal law knowledge with professional action. Students reported stronger understanding of how to act for a client, and reviewers recognised the professional value of the design.

This is important in practical legal education. Students may know legal rules but still be unsure how a matter moves, what information is needed, what decisions must be made and what work product should result. A workflow makes the procedural and professional structure of the task available for examination.[22] It also creates opportunities to teach judgement. Once the default pathway is visible, students can be asked when it should change, what facts alter the next step and how ethical or procedural obligations constrain action.

The survey also shows that workflows were not clear to all students. This means future design should focus not just on including workflows, but on making them visible and usable for learners.

8.4 Educator workload as a possible indicator of learning-design quality

The Crime topic suggests that educator workload can sometimes reveal what the learning design is failing to carry. DiBiase's time study of comparable distance and classroom courses argued that teaching effort is partly a function of instructional design and that poorly designed courses are likely to require more effort to achieve the same objectives. Later research similarly identified course design and development, facilitation patterns, class size and feedback demands as material variables in the amount and type of time instructors spend teaching online. This literature supports treating workload not simply as an operational total, but as a pattern of activities that may reveal where course architecture is generating recurrent clarification or remediation.[23]

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[22] Kift and Nakano (n 6) 74–80, 91–5.

[23] David DiBiase, 'Is Distance Teaching More Work or Less Work?' (2000) 14(3) American Journal of Distance Education 6, 18–19; Rebecca Van de Vord and Korolyn Pogue, 'Teaching Time Investment: Does

Transparent-assignment research points in the same direction at a more granular level. When purpose, task and success criteria are made explicit, faculty have reported fewer last-minute requests for guidance, fewer grade disputes, easier explanation and grading, and better-quality student work.[24] The Crime-topic observations are consistent with those findings. They suggest that repeated clarification, navigational explanation and correction of predictable task misunderstandings can be treated as diagnostic signals: not all teaching workload is caused by the inherent difficulty of the subject; some may be compensatory work created by avoidable opacity in the learning environment.

8.5 Workload is redistributed, not eliminated

This does not mean that good course design is costless. The Crime redesign required substantial upfront design effort, and online-learning research repeatedly shows that development can be labour intensive. The more defensible proposition is that deliberate design can redistribute instructional effort from recurrent downstream clarification into reusable upstream architecture. The desired outcome is not minimum educator contact, but a shift from routine instructional repair towards the activities for which professional educators add greatest value: testing reasoning, exploring ambiguity, modelling judgement and giving targeted developmental feedback.

8.6 Capability claims and evidential restraint

The results show that students perceived the unit as clearer, more confidence-building and more professionally oriented. They do not prove that the unit produced stronger legal capability. The professional-skills comparison is especially instructive. The lower positive result and high neutral response suggest that students were cautious about making a broad claim. That caution should also guide the researchers.

Future research should measure actual performance. This could include student work products, assessment outcomes, patterns of error, oral explanations, transfer tasks or comparisons with earlier versions of the unit. Until such evidence is available, the appropriate conclusion is that the unit created conditions that students and reviewers associated with capability formation.

8.7 Quality assurance implications

Online Really Take More Time than Face-to-Face?' (2012) 13(3) International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning 132, 135–42.

[24] Mary-Ann Winkelmes et al, 'Benefits (Some Unexpected) of Transparently Designed Assignments' (2015) 24(4) The National Teaching & Learning Forum 4, 4–7.

The redesigned unit also has quality assurance value because it makes the logic of course design easier to inspect. A reviewer can see the pathway, the link between concepts and activities, the preparation for performance and the evidence used for improvement.

This is stronger than relying on content coverage alone. Content coverage shows that topics are present. It does not show that students are supported to understand, integrate and perform them. The unit also demonstrates the value of combining internal design work with external validation and student evidence. The reviews did not merely confirm that the unit was acceptable. They identified specific improvements. Used properly, that feedback creates a documented cycle of design, evaluation, refinement and re-evaluation.

The quality assurance claim should still be modest. One unit and a small survey cannot establish whole-of-course quality. The unit is better presented as an emerging method that could be tested across a broader curriculum.

9. Learnings and improvement priorities

The evaluation points to several practical improvements for the next version of the Crime unit and for any wider use of the model.

9.1 Replace implicit structure with explicit course mapping

The full learning pathway should be shown at the start. It should identify the matter, main stages, key tasks and link between learning activities and final performance. The map should also reappear during the unit so students can see where they are, what they have completed and what the current stage prepares them to do.

9.2 Signpost the learning function of each activity

Activities should be labelled according to their pedagogical purpose. For example:

- concept formation;
- model observation;
- guided practice;
- retrieval checkpoint;
- integrated performance;
- feedback and revision;
- reflection;
- transfer.

This would help students understand the purpose of each activity and choose the right approach to it.

9.3 Increase the use of worked examples and annotated models

Before students produce complex legal deliverables, they should examine examples that reveal both product and process.[25] A worked example should show more than the final answer. It should explain how information was selected, how the task was framed, what choices were made and how quality was judged.[26]

Examples should be chunked. Students may first examine individual components before encountering a complete professional artefact.

9.4 Strengthen guided practice before integrated performance

The next version should identify the smaller capabilities required for each complex activity. Those parts should be taught or practised before students are asked to combine them.

This does not mean removing challenge. It means making sure the challenge is the intended legal task, not confusion about basic requirements.

9.5 Make workflow position and deliverables explicit

Every activity should answer three questions:

1. Where are we in the legal matter?
2. What professional decision or action is required?
3. What record, communication or deliverable should result?

These questions should be visible to students, not only to the designers.

9.6 Develop retrieval, feedback and transfer more systematically

The next version should give more attention to what happens after practice: retrieval, feedback, revision and transfer.

Students should revisit earlier concepts, receive feedback on reasoning and process, revise their work and apply learning to changed circumstances. Transfer tasks are

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[25] Sally Kift and Rachael Field, 'Intentional First Year Curriculum Design as a Means of Facilitating Student Engagement: Some Exemplars' (2009) 12(2) Legal Education Review 23.
[26] Sweller and Cooper (n 2) 59–66; Merrill (n 5) 50–2.

especially important. If students can complete a task only in the original story, they may have developed familiarity rather than transferable capability.[27]

9.7 Retain cultural responsiveness as a design requirement

Because the redesign began with concerns about culturally insensitive content, cultural responsiveness should remain an explicit design and quality-assurance requirement. Australian legal education standards and scholarship on Indigenous content and cultural competency support systematic attention to whose experiences are represented, how clients and communities are portrayed, and whether learning activities reproduce assumptions that may distort professional judgement.[28]

Narratives, examples, client representation, language and professional assumptions should continue to be reviewed, with cultural expertise included where needed.

9.8 Improve the evaluation methodology

A stronger evaluation should use several forms of evidence over time, including:

- pre- and post-intervention measures;
- comparison with an earlier unit version;
- analysis of student performance on common tasks;
- assessment of transfer to a new factual scenario;
- interviews or focus groups;
- learning analytics;
- teacher observations;
- follow-up evidence from later units or workplace supervisors.

The survey should also be refined. Some current questions combine several ideas, such as workflows, frameworks and structured tasks. Separating these would make the results easier to interpret. Future questions should distinguish between clarity, confidence, perceived learning and demonstrated capability. Open-text questions would also help explain why some students found the workflow less useful.

9.9 Measure educator workload as part of future evaluation

[27] Barnett and Ceci (n 7) 621–6.

[28] Council of Australian Law Deans, Australian Law School Standards (Version 1.3, 30 July 2020) 15–18; Annette Gainsford, Marcus Smith and Alison Gerard, 'Accrediting Indigenous Australian Content and Cultural Competency within the Bachelor of Laws' (2021) 31(1) Legal Education Review 59, 59–66.

Future iterations should test the workload proposition directly. Useful measures include preparation time, the number and type of student clarification questions, time spent on task explanation, recurring feedback themes and the proportion of feedback directed to instruction-following rather than substantive legal reasoning. These measures should be used diagnostically, not as crude productivity targets. A desirable redesign may reduce low-value clarification while increasing time spent on higher-value professional discussion.

9.10 Establish a design fidelity framework

Before the model is scaled, the institution should identify which elements are essential and which can vary by subject. Essential elements might include:

- visible course mapping;
- structured progression;
- workflow-based task framing;
- modelling before complex performance;
- guided practice;
- feedback and revision;
- transfer;
- documented alignment with learning outcomes.

Other features, such as narrative format or particular technologies, may be adaptable according to subject matter. A fidelity framework would stop the model being reduced to superficial features, such as adding a flowchart or splitting content into smaller pages.

Table 2. Proposed design fidelity framework

Essential elements	Adaptable features
Visible course mapping	Narrative format
Structured progression	Subject-specific scenarios
Workflow-based task framing	Particular technologies
Modelling before complex performance	Form of professional deliverables
Guided practice	Sequence variations suited to the discipline
Feedback and revision	Modes of learner interaction
Transfer	Media used for examples and demonstrations

Table 2. Proposed design fidelity framework	
Essential elements	**Adaptable features**
Documented alignment with learning outcomes	Assessment context and delivery platform

10. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The student sample was small, with 19 respondents, so the findings cannot be generalised with confidence.

There was no control group, matched comparison or pre-intervention measure. The student data are self-reported, so they show perceptions rather than objective performance.[29] The survey instrument had not been formally validated, and some questions combined several ideas. The external validation evidence was based on summaries rather than full reports. Most importantly for the present paper, educator workload was not measured prospectively: the delivery benefits were retrospective observations and should be treated as hypothesis-generating rather than causal evidence.

The redesign took place under time pressure and within an existing course environment. Its results may reflect the specific subject, cohort, teachers, assessments and institutional context.

Finally, the study does not measure long-term retention, transfer to other legal tasks or workplace performance. These would require further research.

11. Conclusion

The redesigned Crime topic is a credible prototype for a more structured form of online practical legal education. Its main contribution is not technology. It lies in changing the architecture of learning so that orientation, workflow, modelling and practice are more visible to students before complex performance is required.

The student evidence supports that direction: respondents generally experienced the topic as clear, confidence-building and professionally meaningful. The external reviews likewise supported the design while identifying areas for further refinement. The educator observations add a second dimension. Clearer student-facing materials

[29] Gabbard and Romanelli (n 21) 1–6.

appeared to reduce preparation, clarification and remedial-feedback demands while improving the consistency of student work.

These findings do not establish that good design automatically reduces workload. They support a narrower and more useful proposition: when essential instructional structure is left implicit, educators may have to recreate it during delivery. When that structure is designed into the learning environment, some routine explanatory work can move upstream into reusable course architecture.

Good design therefore does not remove the educator. It can protect educator capacity for the work that most requires human expertise—challenging reasoning, discussing professional uncertainty, modelling judgement and providing individualised feedback. This is the central implication of the case for practical legal education.

The next stage should test this relationship systematically, combining direct measures of student performance with measures of preparation time, student questions, guidance and feedback. Educator workload—particularly compensatory teaching load—may then become a useful additional indicator of learning-design quality rather than being treated only as an operational concern.

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