

Advocating a Holistic Approach to Continuing Professional Development Provision for Practitioners and Providers



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Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationship between Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Life Long Learning (LLL), Work Life Balance (WLB) and the linking key concept of Employability, with a view to developing a holistic approach to CPD provision.

It is understood that an important aspect of any professional person's development is CPD; it enables the vital issue of being a "Reflective Practitioner" to be addressed by professionals and assists in gaining an improvement in professional performance. One could also argue that CPD in the past has failed to be continuous and inclusive; it has not fully embraced the concept of Life Long Learning and has been fragmented and less than developmental. Concerns in the United Kingdom for CPD as a "national need" have been acknowledged by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in the report (NCIHE 1997) "*We believe that the aim of higher education should be to sustain a learning society*". The emphasis here is clearly placed upon continuity throughout life, on broader knowledge and intellectual skills as well as vocational skills, and on ownership by the learner through the achievement of personal fulfilment. This paper provides a valid methodology for addressing the full implications and incorporated aspects of CPD.

Keywords: Continuing professional development, employability, life long learning, reflective practitioner, work life balance

1. Introduction

CPD has been defined as "*The systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skills, and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties through a practitioners working life*" (RICS 1993). Thus the definition introduces and links to the concept of Life Long Learning, an acknowledgment that one never stops learning. The benefits of CPD as a Life Long Learning professional life style have been established as, the achievement of success in professional practise, enhanced quality assurance in the provision of professional services, contributing to client delight [satisfaction] and contribution to sustained income generation (Le Roux et al 2004)

Thus a wider set of economic benefits that go beyond merely those of employment should be considered and embraced. This concern is for a more comprehensive and holistic notion of CPD and the provision of a framework of opportunity for practitioners throughout their working life. This issue is to be discussed further within the paper.

2. The Mixed Complexities of CPD

2.1 Work Based Learning Issues

The focus now being placed on CPD is forcing both Higher Education and Professional Institutions to re-examine their methodologies for developing and delivering CPD programmes. This is because if CPD is to be genuinely continuous, then the traditional approaches currently adopted by many universities must change. With pressures being exerted to reduce the length of degree courses there is no longer time for traditional routes on undergraduate programmes to provide professionals with all the tools and skills required to do their jobs both now and in the future.

Within Higher Education Institutions, the key client group is no longer 18 – 25 year olds, it is in fact moving towards a more mature and experienced people set, wishing to enhance their existing qualifications to meet changing circumstances and future needs. Most importantly they wish to combine these with work based activities and truly attain the status of an "Effective Reflective Practitioner". Therefore CPD can be extended to encompass the concept of "Work Based Learning" This can also be credit bearing

and linked to a formal qualification, for example, within a degree course designed at Sheffield Hallam University UK, which was built around CPD and in conjunction with the Association of Building Engineers, a 20 credit bearing module called Reflective Professional Practise was developed.

The entire course structure was designed to be delivered in a flexible manner so as to meet the CPD requirements of a professional market place. It was fully understood by the course development team that many practicing professionals have years of accumulated relevant valuable experience. Hollerton (2005) opined that *"It's not usually the level of knowledge required [that causes problems for professional body students] it's the style of [academic] work required"*. Thus the new course sought to address the style issue and to utilise to a maximum those valuable experiences by providing academic credit for mature experienced students.

The credit is based on their ability to actively reflect upon occupational experience. The work based learning element cemented the notion of the value of the practical application of knowledge in the work place (Billett 1999) and further developed the situational skills (Hinchliffe 2002) or contextual Knowledge (Portwood 2000) that these authors advocate as being essential for the performance of a professional occupational role.

Thus it is imperative that the complex issue of CPD does incorporate the "Work Based Learning" concept, within the course students produce a "Portfolio of Evidence" covering the required learning outcomes/competences. For students it provides a focus for their learning and, in action, it also provides an accelerated means of obtaining academic credit related to industrial practise.

Given the current debate relating to work based learning, it is interesting to explore the role of universities and colleges in CPD. The challenge seems to be one of meeting the needs of industry in terms of identifiable benefits and flexibility of learning and yet ensuring academic quality. It could be argued that industry does not want traditional academic qualifications at all, and the problem for universities is to re-focus on valid professional competences. The emphasis here is clearly being placed upon continuity throughout life, on broader knowledge and intellectual skills as well as vocational skills, and on ownership by the learner through personal development and fulfilment.

A wider set of social and economic benefits beyond merely those of employment should be considered. This concern is for a more comprehensive and holistic notion of CPD and a framework of opportunity that embraces early years schooling through further and higher education to include mid-career as well as pre- and post retirement needs.

The development of a key skills framework is fundamental to the accreditation of work based learning. If each individual student programme is separately negotiated the key skills approach offers an effective methodology for ensuring comparability across and between programmes of work. There is, of course, no simple definitive answer to the question of what the key skills are and which are appropriate to the different levels of award within any programme of study.

2.2 Work Life Balance Issues

The concept of Work Life Balance impinges upon a practitioners working life and hence is also an integral part of CPD. Work Life Balance is not about trying to schedule an equal number of hours for each of an individuals working and social activities. It is however, about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual's right to fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as a norm of behaviour, to the mutual benefit of the individual, employer and society.

The result of a working and personal life that is out of balance is increased stress levels and hence an adverse impact upon work related performance.

For most people juggling the demands of a career and a personal life is an ongoing challenge. With so many demands placed on employees it is difficult to strike an appropriate balance. The objective should be to make time for what is important to the individual.

Thus having a realistic balance between the time spent working and the time one has to spend on other more social activities, such as ones family is a critical factor and an employer must be attuned to this concept in order to appropriately balance out an employees workload. After all CPD is usually undertaken as an "Add-On" activity to a normal employees workload. If an employee does not obtain time to unwind they are very unlikely to be able to maintain a sustained out-put at work.

So organisations must be aware of situations where work is taking over their employee's life, this can only lead to a lose/lose situation for both employee and employer. What in fact should be the goal of the employer is a win/win situation, this can be attained if the concept of work life balance is accepted and acted on.

One of the vital aspects of avoiding an adverse work-life balance is the leadership of managers. It is the 'people skills' of managers that seem to be lacking. Therefore managers, as do all levels of staff require training and development. Thus both the undergraduate curriculum and CPD should contain 'People Skills Management'.

2.3 Life Long Learning Issues

Life Long Learning can be defined as all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic and social and/or employment – related perspective.

Thus Life Long Learning is about acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications. It promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each person to adapt to our knowledge – based society.

Life Long Learning is also about providing second chances to update basic skills and offering learning opportunities at more advanced levels. All this means that formal systems of provision need to become much more flexible, so that such opportunities can truly be tailored to meet the needs of employees/students.

As noted above some academic awards are moving away from the traditional undergraduate and postgraduate taught course framework and towards one which can accommodate and respond to the needs of CPD, a new structure for making awards is required. Modular structures driven by credit based learning and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATS) have been the popular way of achieving these new building blocks. Credit based learning means that points can be earned from a wide variety of learning experiences. For such a modular credit based approach to work effectively, it has to be based on a common set of criteria with a standard metric. To this end a national system for credit accumulation and transfer, in which common and standardised tariffs are associated with a defined framework of awards offered within the higher education framework, has been developed.

Further the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum should develop "Transferable Skills". These transferable skills should encompass the skill to learn. To explain this further, if a professional is to truly benefit from engaging in the life long learning activity then they require specific learning skills. So the curriculum has to have learning outcomes, teaching and assessment strategies based upon students acting as far as is practicable as independent learners. For example this would include the ability to conduct research, gather data and critically evaluate it, and drawing meaning full valid conclusions. Thus the shaded area in Figure.2 depicts the overlap between employability and life long learning. (Hemmington 1999).

2.4 Employability Issues

A further concept requiring noting within the paper and one which forms part of the total holistic approach to CPD delivery is the key concept of "Employability". The approach adopted by Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in relation to 'Employability' is very distinctive because it is based upon a long tradition of providing professional vocational awards. Further in 2005 SHU was awarded national recognition (UK) as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Employability.

Defining Employability 'Employability' refers to a range of potential work activities and these include:

- Paid/self employment
- Creative/artistic work
- Work in/for the community
- Family responsibilities

In order to address the issues encompassed above, SHU have incorporated a strategy based upon a distinctive approach. SHU's approach is distinctive because it concentrates on 'integrating and embedding' a coherent set of curriculum features within all its awards.

Integration: bringing together all features (e.g. through a vehicle such as student placement and/or the utilisation of case studies) so that students are better able to make the relevant connections between curriculum and application.

Embedding: having learning outcomes with relevant learning and teaching methods and assessment, which are all aligned, presenting a truly holistic approach.

Therefore it is vital to have a valid curriculum designed with an input from all relevant sources, and linking learning outcomes to appropriate methods of assessment. The teaching methods should enable the material to be delivered and tested, hence the utilisation of a 'teaching vehicle' such as a case study.

The Construction Industry Council (UK) which represents construction professionals is a partner in Construction Skills, the Sector Skills and Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) Northern Ireland. Construction Skills represents the whole of the UK construction industry. The four key goals of Construction Skills have been established as:

- Reducing skills gaps and shortages
- Improving performance
- Boosting skills and productivity
- Improving learning supply.
- Employers and employees benefit from this approach by improving the quality of training and education on offer to meet both employers and employee needs. Further it ensures that the future skills needs of employers and employees are addressed (in line with SHU's definition of employability).

The above noted goals raise three vital questions:

1. How can employability enhance the curriculum?
2. How can employability enhance graduate employment?
3. How can employers be engaged? (Brown 2006)

Figure. 1 provides a pictorial guide for addressing these critical questions, it also depicts their interlinking. What is evident from the inspection of Figure. 1 is that the three issues/questions cannot be treated as mutually exclusive. Employer contact and consultation influences the curriculum content which in turn impacts upon the employability agenda.

Thus it has been demonstrated that a professional's future performance, development and employability are impacted upon by the undergraduate curriculum.

However, learning does not stop upon graduation, at this point the professional should be embarking upon Continuous Professional Development (Life Long Learning).

This concept appertains to developing within graduates the skills to learn and transferable skills, these are critical skills when considering the Life Long Learning concept.

A critical aspect of this paper is the advocacy of a holistic strategy when trying to address the CPD agenda for professional practitioners, rather than the disparate approach that tends to be the preferred strategy adopted by most CPD providers.

3. Case Study

Having described Work Based Learning, Work Life Balance, Life Long Learning and Employability the following provides an integrated practical application in the form of a case study. It is based on the Association of Building Engineering (ABE) and Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) UK. The ABE has a requirement for all members to engage in some form of CPD activities, and promotion can often be linked to the attainment of academic qualifications. Thus ABE membership approached the ABE for some kind of formal CPD that would both lead to a formal qualification and be accessible, as normal part-time attendance would not be possible due to employer restrictions. The initiative had to be cognisant of the following:

- many ABE members have a wealth of professional experience but may not have formal qualifications;
- SHU's mission is to forge collaborative links with relevant professional bodies.

Our main objective (at SHU) of the collaboration was to build on our existing good links between ABE and SHU, so we endeavoured to:

- design and validate an appropriate academic award built on CPD;
- develop a relevant curriculum building on the existing strengths of students, e.g. work related experience, encompassing Employability and Life Long Learning concepts;
- empower access to the award by matching student requirements with delivery mode, address the Work Based Learning agenda;
- deliver and monitor the award and if necessary take appropriate actions, to ensure the required competences and skill are incorporated into our curriculum.

The devised methodological approach was based upon setting-up a representative award planning team (including ABE and Employer

representatives) and building on existing qualifications (HNC/HND) and experience of students.

Therefore we developed module guides for the award of a BSc (Hons) Building Engineering degree containing appropriate:

- learning outcomes, addressing required curriculum and skills/competences;
- assessment criteria, engaging with employability;
- feedback strategy, addressing the reflective practitioner concept;
- support systems, having appropriate support bearing in mind the delivery mode.

The programme structure was designed to be delivered in a flexible manner so as to meet the CPD requirements of the professional market place. From research conducted by Le Roux et al (2004) the "...benefits gained through implementation of CPD as a life long learning professional life style and an established organisational policy by practitioners operating in the built environment were identified as:

- [the] achievement of success in professional practice;
- [having] quality assurance in the provision of professional services
- contribution to "client delight" and
- contribution to sustained income generation."

The above were not mutually exclusive with the objectives of SHU and the ABE when we were considering the outcomes of CPD and the new award, and the above were fully embraced in our development. We used diverse methods of assessment that are consistent, practicable, and timely and effective in helping students demonstrate the achievement of intended lear-

ning outcomes. We also specified clear assessment criteria designed to help ensure standards are enhanced and to let students know what is required in order to improve their performance.

The ABE (in conjunction with SHU) now provides a CPD linked BSc (Hons) award for its membership, the award is innovative in terms of both delivery and in its assessment strategy (utilising Work Based Learning concepts). The model described in this case study can be adapted/adopted by other Higher Educational and Professional Bodies, and Figure.3 provides a valuable flow diagram of the developmental and delivery process. Again this diagram can be adopted or adapted to suit.

4. Conclusions

Within this paper the concepts of Employability, CPD, LLL and Work Life Balance have been explored. However it is important to point out that these are not mutually exclusive components of a professional's development and performance.

The undergraduate curriculum impacts upon future CPD and both employability and CPD impact upon Work Life Balance. In an ever changing operational environment where the focus is on client satisfaction within an established cost framework we must not forget the true meaning of employability, and the adverse effects of not obtaining an acceptable Work Life Balance for employees.

This paper should prove useful to the providers of CPD and practitioners, as it provides a model for adopting a holistic strategy which incorporates Continuing Professional Development, Life Long Learning, Work Life Balance and Employability to the benefit of all concerned.

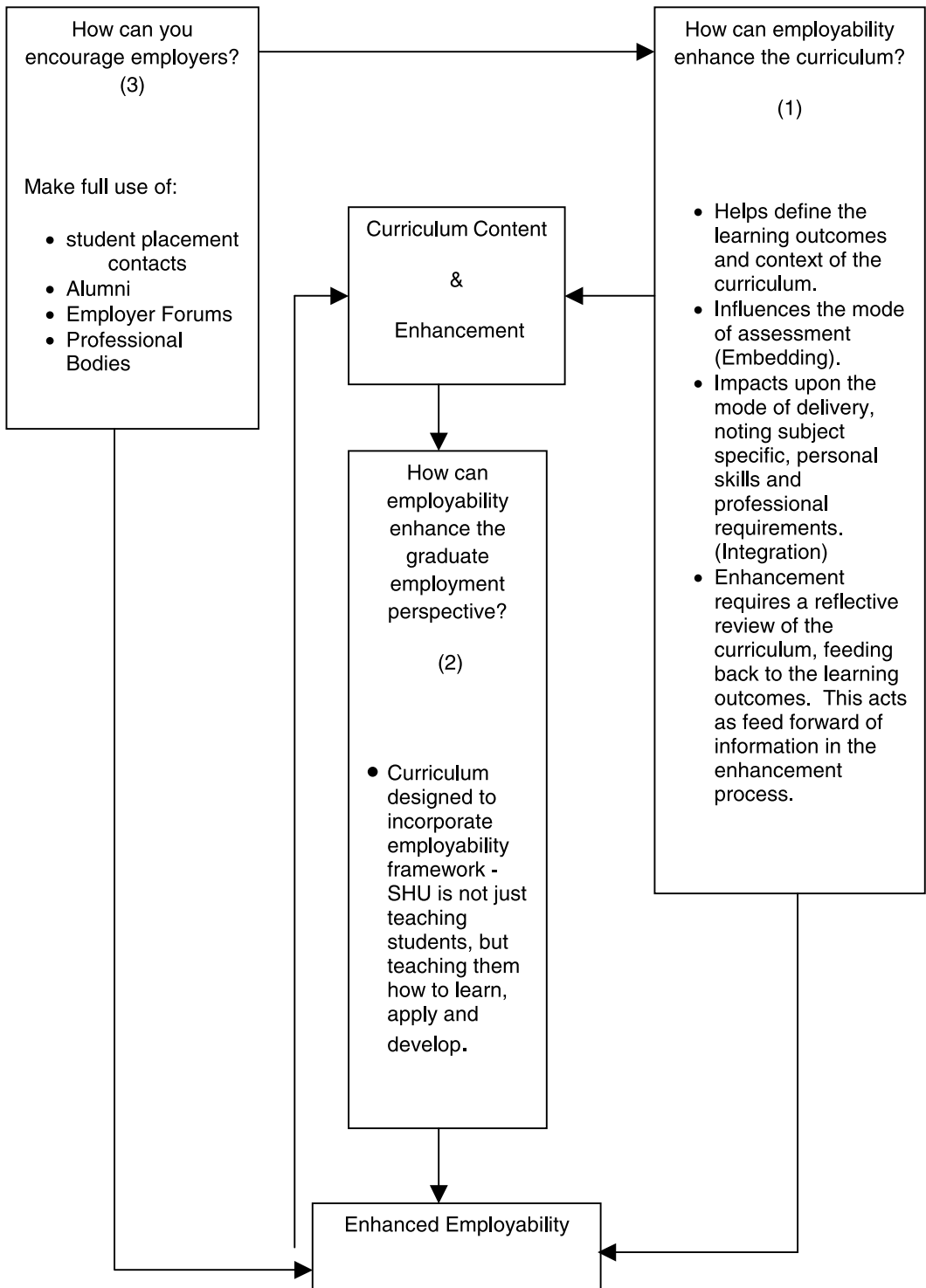


Fig. 1: Employability Entering the Curriculum

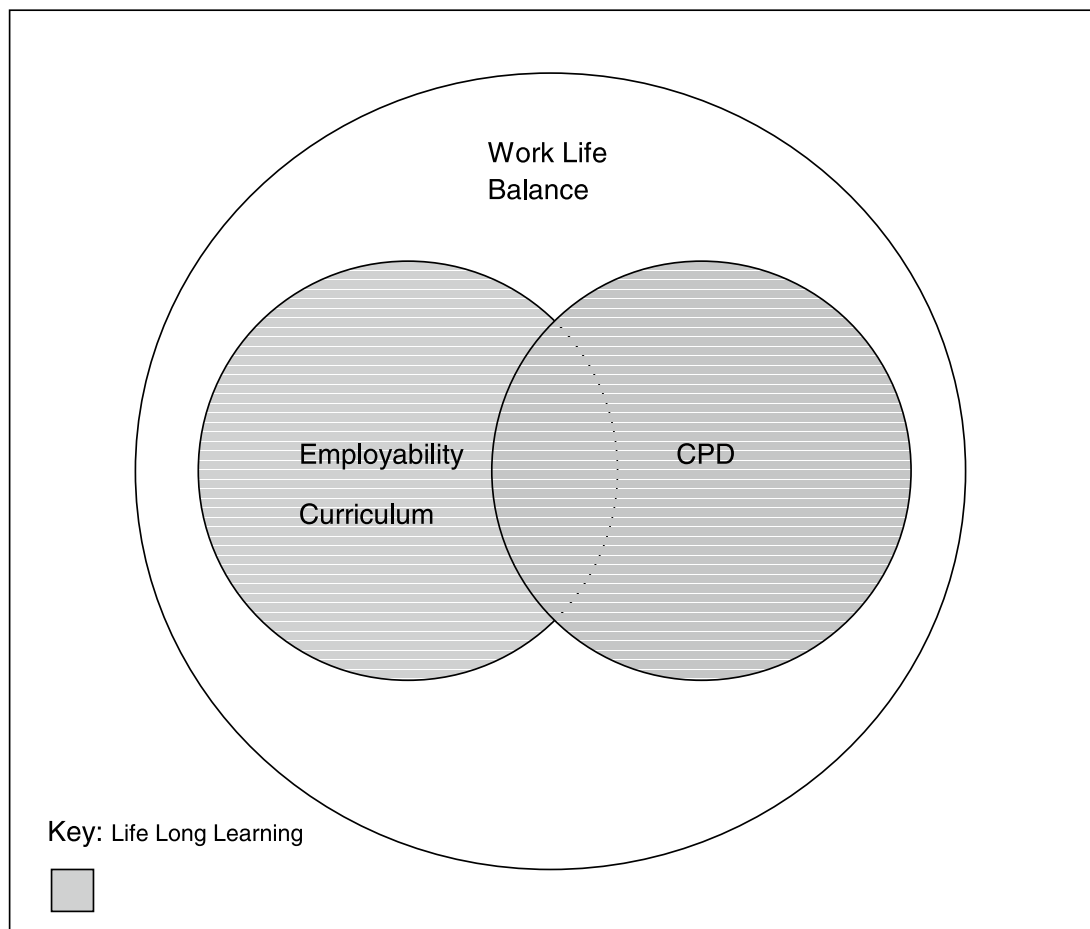


Fig. 2: Linking Employability, LLL, CPD and Work Life Balance

Figure 1
Developmental Flow
Diagram

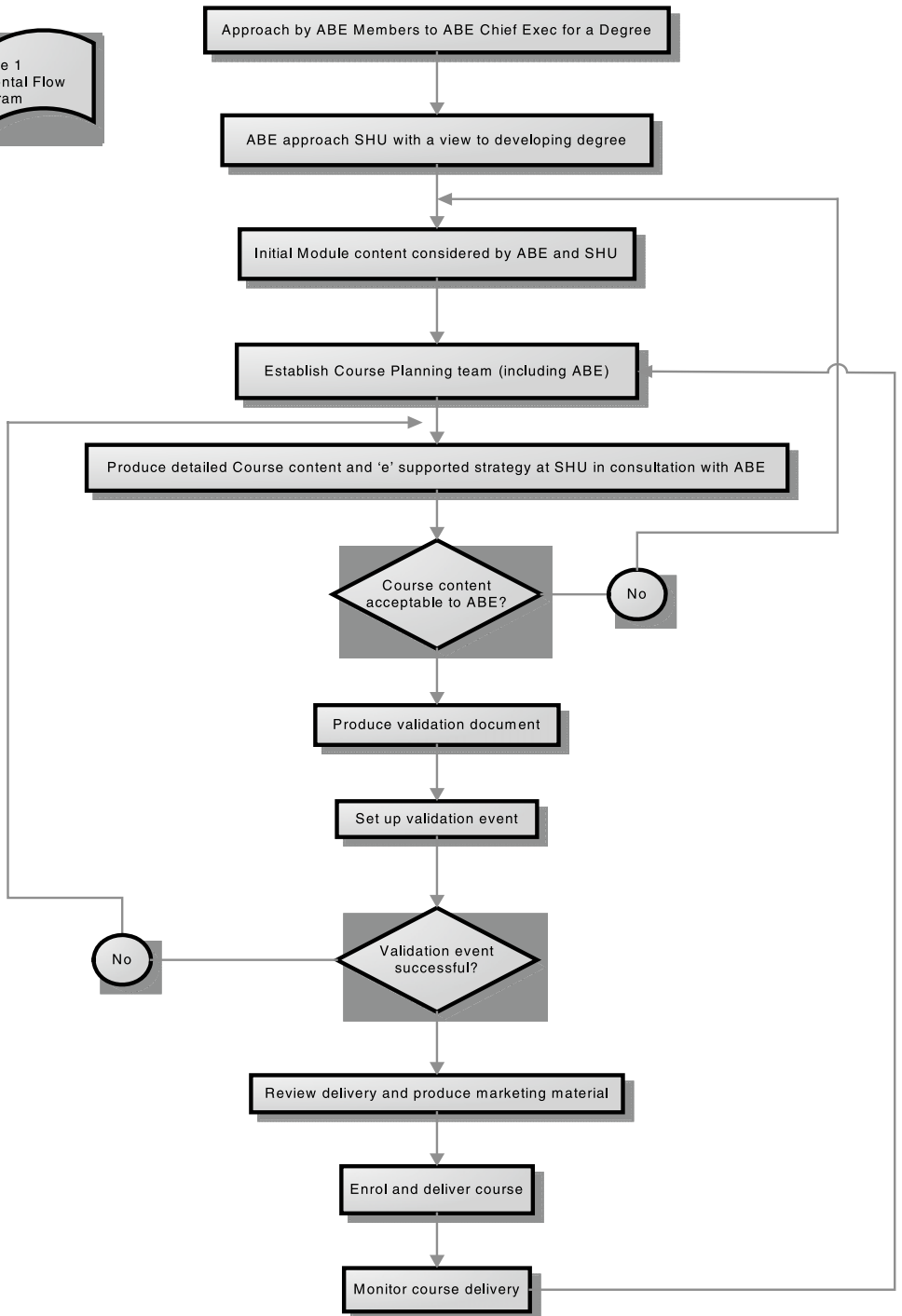


Fig. 3: Developmental Process of Case Study

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