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# Graduate Research School

## PhD Candidate

# THE PROBLEM WITH SOFT SKILLS: EXPLORING A NEW CONCEPTUALISATION TO A HOLISTIC APPROACH

# An overview

## Setting the scene

→ Why is this space important:

- Career readiness
- Demise of TAFE
- Economic restructuring

## Focus
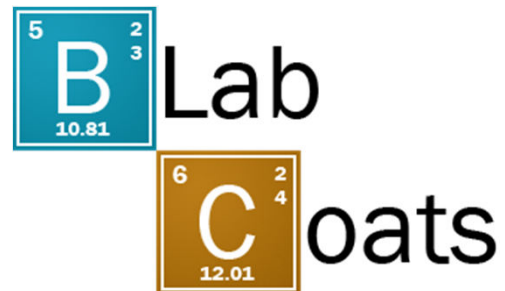
→ Why Skills?

→ Directions

→ Research

## Supervisors



Spreading Hope with Prof James Arvanitakis



Meditating on Religion with Dr Alex Norman



Thermovangelising with Dr Jack Tsonis



B Lab Coats

# 01.

# WHY SKILLS?

A way to look at skills in the current context

# Why 'Skills'?

## Skills are so 'hot' right now

# Why 'Skills'?

## Skills are so 'hot' right now

→ Industry recognition and accreditation are increasing (Aherns and Khalifa, 2015)

→ Australian Qualifications Framework guidelines for skills based curriculum (Bowman, 2010)

→ Precedent in the Bologna process in Europe (Gornitzka, 2010)

→ Changing expectations of graduates and career paths

→ Graduate Careers Australia – Graduate Outlook (2015)

| Selection Criteria | % |
|---|---|
| Interpersonal and communication skills | 58.3 |
| Cultural alignment/values fit | 34.3 |
| Emotional intelligence (including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation) | 26.2 |
| Reasoning and problem-solving skills | 22.6 |
| Academic results | 19.6 |
| Work experience | 19.1 |
| Technical skills | 14.4 |

(Graduate Careers Australia, 2015)
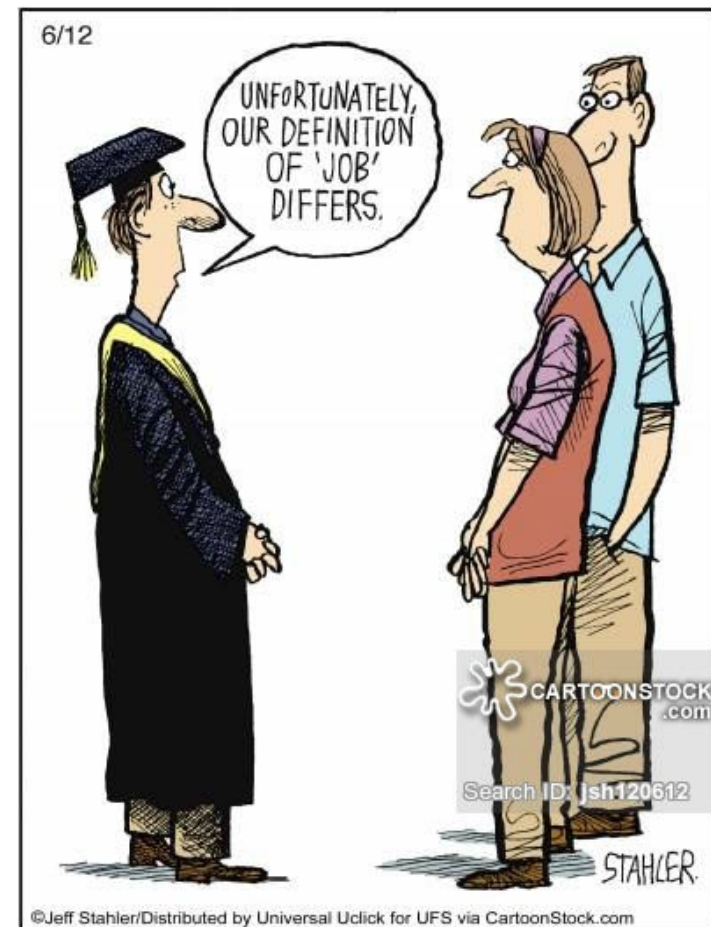
# Why 'Skills'?

**How do 'you' define skills? Good question...**

AQF (Bowman, 2010)

→ School sector – General capabilities

→ Vocational training – Employability skills
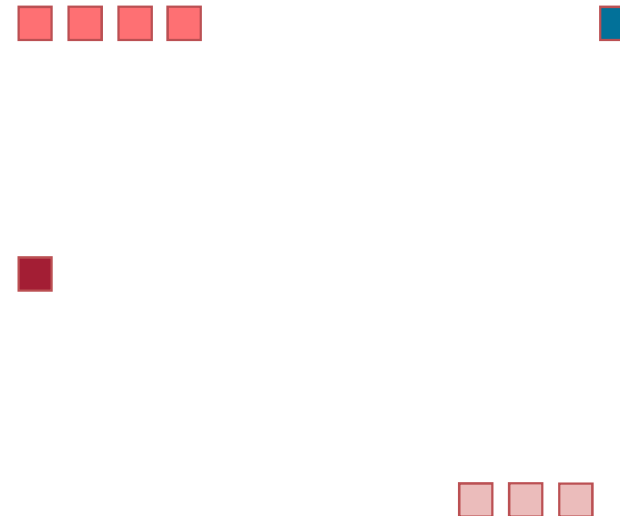
→ Higher education – Graduate attributes

Literature

→ Higher education – Graduate attributes

→ Industry – Graduate competence

→ Students – Employability

# Why 'Skills'?

## The confusion continues

→ Graduate Competency

→ Graduate Attributes

→ Employability Skills

→ Generic Skills

→ Soft Skills

→ Hard Skills

→ Transferable Skills

→ Enterprise Skills

→ INSERT YOUR FAVOURITE HERE…

(Chamorro-Premuzic, et al., 2010; Frank, 2007; Jackson, 2012; Jones, 2013; National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2003; Singh and Singh, 2008; University of Adelaide, 2016)

# Reform

**Now is a good time**

In an age of robots, schools are teaching our children to be redundant

## Easier access to university has devalued degrees, created huge debt and made some feel like failures

### How prepared are university students for the jobs of the future?

### We have got it all wrong about university education

### 'The end of TAFE as we know it': leaked paper details federal vocational takeover

# Reform

**Now is a good time**

# Reform

**Now is a good time**

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## 02.

# DIRECTIONS

What does this mess get us into?

# Higher education curriculum design

**Define 'curriculum'**

→ There are many curriculum models

→ Jones (2012) – Integrated and contextualised

→ Barnett (2009) – Strangeness the new universality

→ Barrie (2010) – Graduate Attributes and Conceptualisations

→ Schulman (2006) – Head, heart, and Hands

→ John Henry Newman – The idea of the university

**Bonus authors**

→ Pre-existing researchers in the skills and wider field

→ Denise Jackson

→ Ruth Bridgstock

→ Leonard Holmes

→ Claire Hughes

# Higher education curriculum design

## Understanding the landscape of innovative skills curriculum

→ Four key structures emerged from the literature

    → Skills-based curriculum                   (Oliver, 2013; Thistlethwaite et al., 2014)

    → Knowledge based curriculum           (Didau, 2011; Young, 2013)

    → Holistic based curriculum               (Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi, and Liaghatdar, 2012)

    → Sustainability based curriculum       (Lozano, Lukman, Lozano, Huisingh, and Lambrechts, 2013; Shephard, 2008)

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# Higher education curriculum design

## Understanding the landscape of higher education

→ Liberal arts (Baum, Kurose, and McPherson, 2013)

→ Vocational (Haidar, 2014)
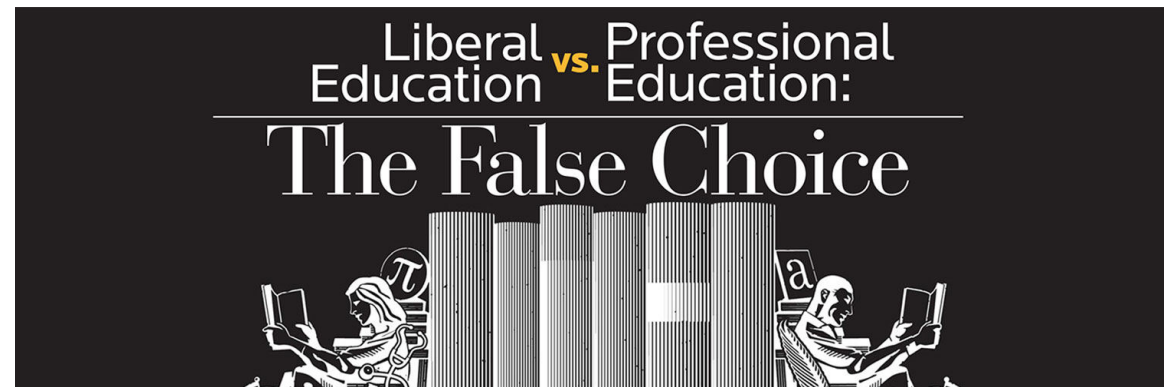


(Shinn, 2014)

# Higher education curriculum design

**Problem with current curriculum approaches**

→ Integrated approach does not come through clearly.

→ Usually one sided view.

→ Stuck in terminology still.

# Higher education curriculum design

## The 'Gap in existing knowledge'

Suggested Approach

```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │    What is      │
                    │    taught       │
                    └─────────────────┘

┌─────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────┐
│   What is       │   ◄──────►   │   What is        │
│   assessed      │              │ expected/encour  │
│                 │              │ aged of students │
└─────────────────┘              └─────────────────┘
```
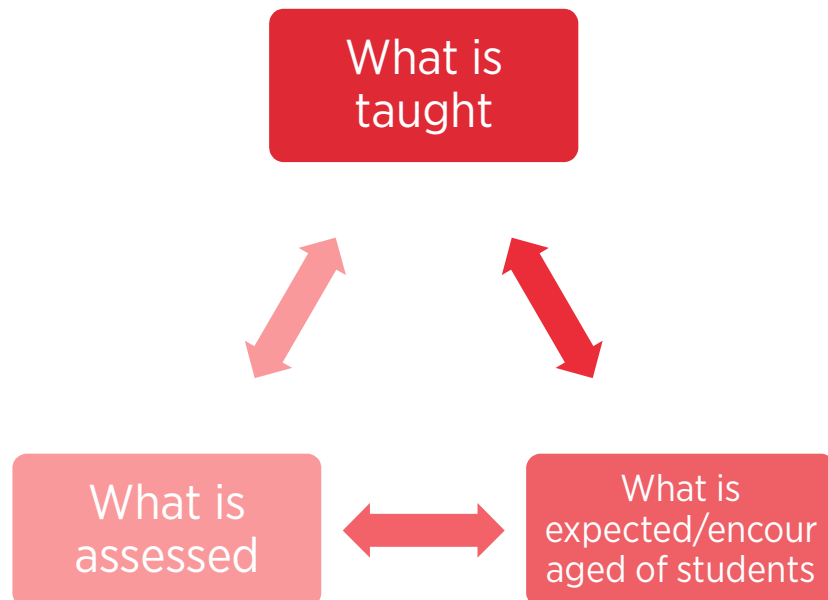
# Higher education curriculum design

## Step 1 – Embracing the ambiguity

→ The existing, polarised approach is unhelpful

→ Skills are important regardless of discipline

→ An integrated approach

→ Limited evidence investigating a combined approach

→ Investigate both generic and discipline specific approaches to educational design (Hill, Walkington, and France, 2016)
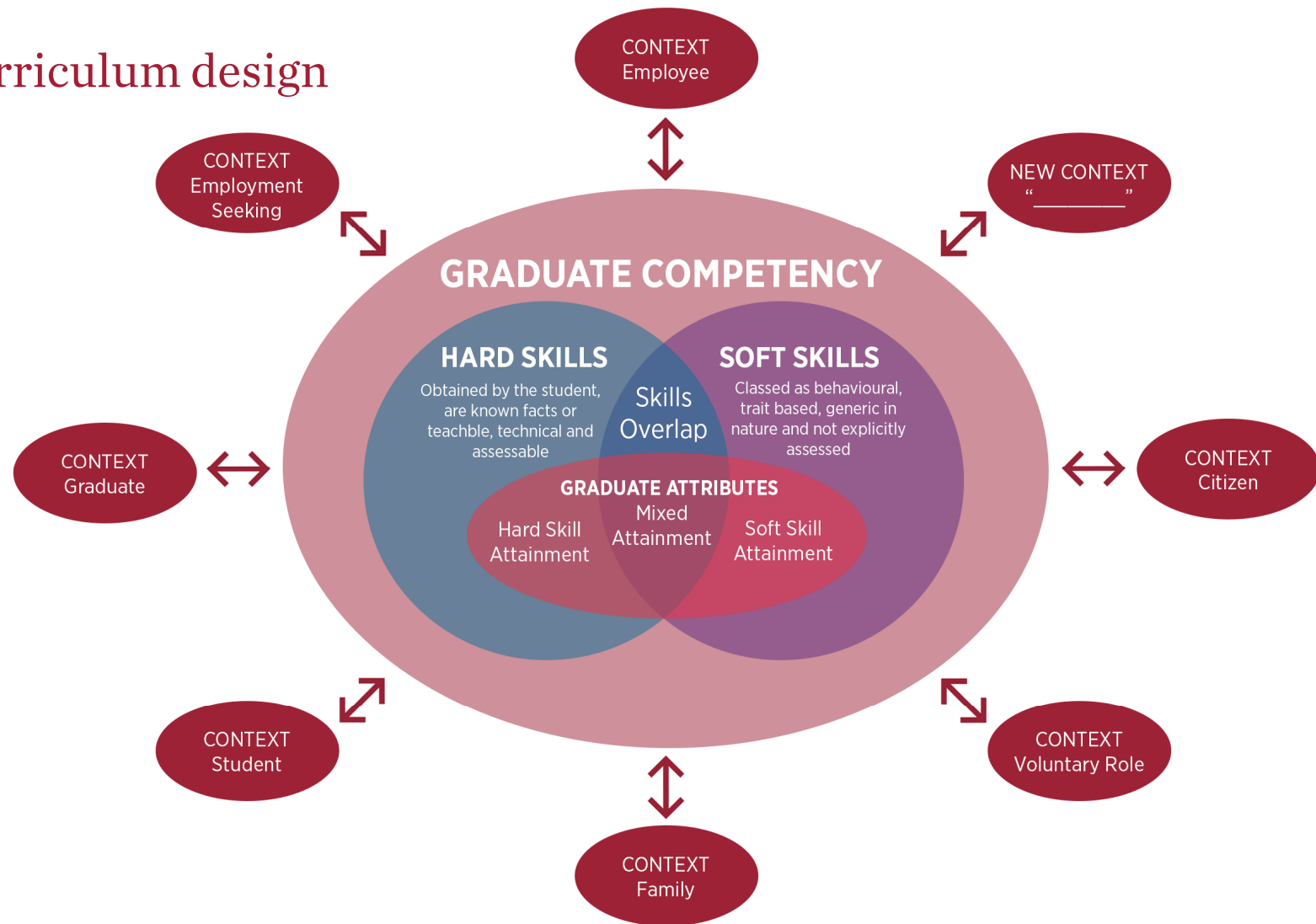


"Can't we handle this through more impersonal channels, like text messaging?"

# Higher education curriculum design

## Step 2 – Provide clarity

→ Need standardised terminology

→ Provide a construct that acknowledges the complexity

→ Noting that this is a fluid concept

3/11/2017



**CONTEXT** Employee

**NEW CONTEXT** "_____"

**CONTEXT** Employment Seeking

**GRADUATE COMPETENCY**

**HARD SKILLS**
Obtained by the student, are known facts or teachble, technical and assessable

Skills Overlap

**SOFT SKILLS**
Classed as behavioural, trait based, generic in nature and not explicitly assessed

**GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES**
Hard Skill Attainment

Mixed Attainment

Soft Skill Attainment

**CONTEXT** Graduate

**CONTEXT** Citizen

**CONTEXT** Student

**CONTEXT** Voluntary Role

**CONTEXT** Family

# Higher education curriculum design

## Step 3 – Targeted strategy

→ Create a 'litmus test' to identify key courses/programs who are exhibiting integrated approaches to curriculum design.

→ Build this test from:

→ Best practice curriculum studies

→ Existing curriculum structures

→ Skills based programs in literature

→ Student rankings

→ University rankings

→ Academic networks

# 03.

# RESEARCH DESIGN

An approach to investigate both existing knowledge and new skills approaches

# Higher education curriculum design

## Research questions

→ What is the perceived importance of a skills-based approach in curriculum
design according to academics, students, industry and alumni?

→ How can an integrated, skills-based theoretical framework prove effective
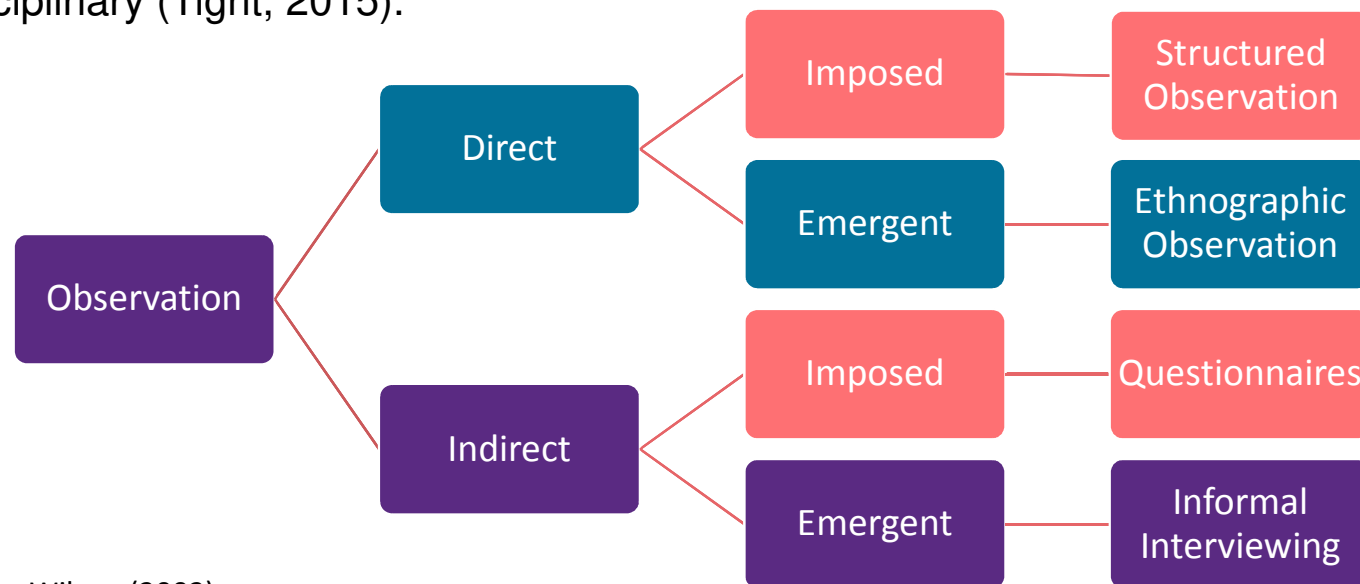in higher education curriculum design?

## Methodology

→ Phenomological

# Phenomological

## Phenomo-what?!?

→ Relies on lived experience and the human experience and behaviour (Van Mahen, 2015).

→ Aims to discover theories and constructs, not rely on them (Van Mahen, 2015)

→ Provides a cross-disciplinary (Tight, 2015).



Wilson (2002)

# Higher education curriculum design

## My phenomological approach

→ Being purposeful in identifying sample groups (van Mahen, 2016)

→ Generative historical phenomenology (van Mahen, 2016)

1 • Gather data from interviews and observations

2 • Read and understand notes

3 • Code information from notes

4 • Create themes from participants experiences

5 • Reflect on data and eliminate redundancy

6 • Overall description into a model of framework

Bracketing
and
Intuition

# Higher education curriculum design

## Benefits of the phenomological approach

→ Reveals the true nature of experience rather than what may look like (van Mahen, 2016).
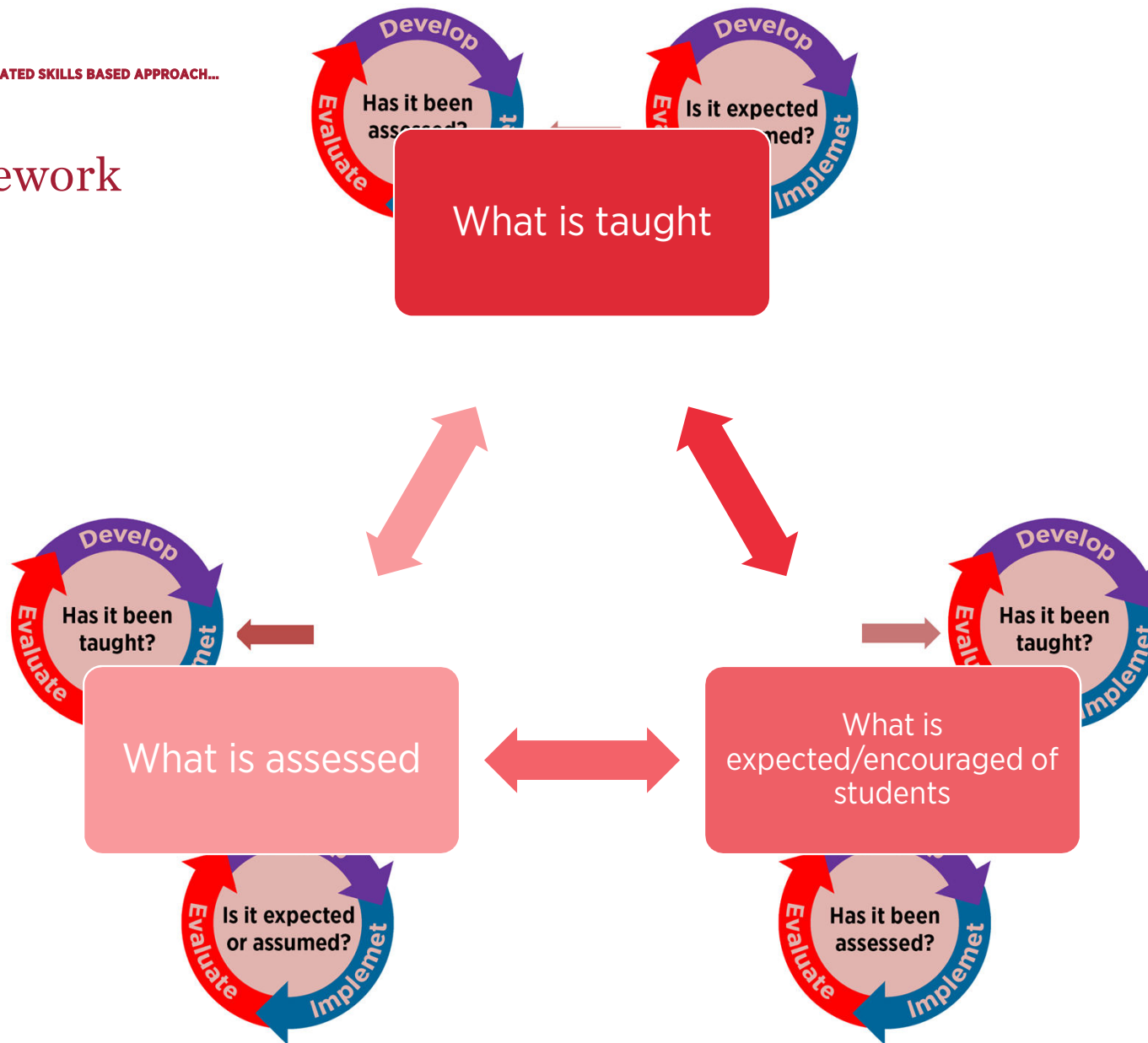
→ An example:

# Higher education curriculum design

## Disadvantages

→ Volume of data and difficulty in analysing data.

→ Researcher bias.

→ Replicability.

→ Hard to make generalisations.

(van Mahen, 2016)

# Initial Framework

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**What is taught**

**What is assessed**

**What is expected/encouraged of students**

Develop
Evaluate
Implemet
Has it been assessed?

Develop
Evaluate
Implemet
Is it expected assumed?

Develop
Evaluate
Implemet
Has it been taught?

Develop
Evaluate
Implemet
Has it been taught?

Develop
Evaluate
Implemet
Is it expected or assumed?

Develop
Evaluate
Implemet
Has it been assessed?

# Higher education curriculum design

## Aims

An integrated skills based approach to higher education design.

→ Based on quality improvement

→ Needs to work for new curriculum and re-design

→ Relevant and to all disciplines

→ Not tied up in taxonomy or classification

# 04.
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