

Experiential Learning Framework

Summary Guide

Prepared by Student Affairs, Career Development and
Experiential Learning (CDEL)

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Need Support with Experiential Learning?

The Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) team supports faculty, instructors, and staff in designing high-quality experiential learning (EL) opportunities across all levels and programs.

We can help you:

- Align your activity with the EL Framework, In-depth Experiential Learning Stream (IELS) course designation, and other quality criteria.
- Integrate the uOCompetencies and structured feedback tools.
- Develop reflection and assessment strategies tailored to your context.
- Inventory, implement, evaluate, and enhance EL across your curriculum.
- Identify and coordinate volunteer placements (individual and group; in-person and virtual) through programs like Community Service Learning (CSL) and Extracurricular Volunteering (EV).
 - Access a network of over 1,200 community partners in French-speaking, English-speaking, and bilingual contexts.
 - Leverage expertise in partnership agreements with community organizations and proof-of-insurance processes.
 - Collaborate with the International Office for global placements and the Risk Management Office for specialized cases.

Explore resources: uottawa.ca/study/career-experiential-learning

Section 1: Purpose and Structure of the EL Framework

The Experiential Learning (EL) Framework at the University of Ottawa is a practical and strategic tool designed to support program development, course design, and the recognition of high-quality EL activities. Originally developed as part of the creation of the In-depth Experiential Learning Stream (IELS), a 30-credit undergraduate stream of EL-labelled courses, the framework has since evolved into a broader institutional guide to enhance coherence, quality, and visibility across experiential offerings. As new forms of EL continue to be developed and implemented across campus, the framework itself will continue to evolve to support emerging needs and opportunities.

The framework was developed collaboratively by a cross-functional working group of academic and administrative staff from multiple faculties and units. It was reviewed by the Council on Undergraduate Studies and formally approved by the University Senate as part of the IELS' major modification request.

Designed to be both robust and adaptable, the framework supports a wide range of experiential formats, including student-led courses, CO-OP placements, internships, community service learning (CSL) projects, field courses, and competency-based workshops. It provides a shared foundation for quality assurance, consistent EL recognition, and the tracking of student progress. This enables faculties and services to evaluate existing activities, design new ones, and build a cohesive, institutional-wide inventory of experiential opportunities.

1.1 Levels of use

The EL Framework can be applied at multiple levels across the institution, from high-level program planning to individual course or activity design. The following section outlines how the framework supports use at the institutional (macro), program/faculty (meso), and instructional (micro) levels.

Institutional Use (Macro Level):

The EL Framework can be used by central units (e.g., Provost Office, Academic Affairs, Institutional Research, Career Development and Experiential Learning) to:

- **Support** institutional planning and strategic alignment with experiential learning goals
- **Standardize** terminology and quality assurance across faculties and units
- **Build** a comprehensive EL inventory for ministry reporting, accreditation, and funding proposals
- **Track** student engagement and competency development across diverse EL experiences

Program and Faculty Use (Meso Level)

Programs, faculties, and curriculum committees can use the framework to:

- **Map and sequence** EL activities across the program lifecycle (e.g., from 1000 to 4000 level courses)
- **Ensure** EL activities align with program learning outcomes and professional or accreditation standards
- **Identify** progression gaps and underrepresented competencies (e.g., lack of reflection or feedback stages)
- **Design or revise** courses to meet IELS or other EL designation criteria

Instructor and Course Use (Micro Level)

Instructors, coordinators, and activity designers can use the framework to:

- **Align** course-level activities with EL standards and student readiness levels
- **Design** learning outcomes, assessments, and reflection activities that promote autonomy, authenticity, and agency
- **Evaluate** student learning and growth through EL assignments and structured reflection
- **Support** the development of disciplinary, professional, and transferable competencies, including the uOCompetencies and SMART(S) goal-setting tools.

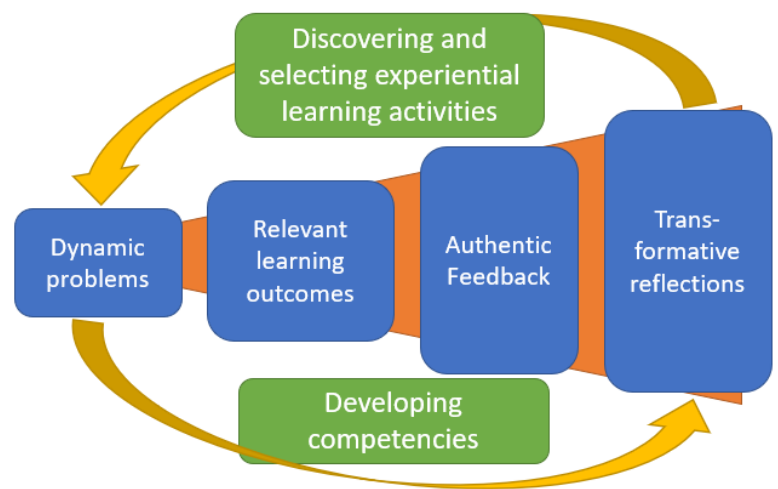
1.2 Foundational Tools

1. The Experiential Learning Cycle

The EL Framework outlines four essential components that must be present, to varying degrees, in any high-quality EL activity. Inspired by Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984), this model emphasizes continuous, iterative learning and explicitly connects activity design to learner development.

Across all disciplines and activity types, effective EL experiences should enable learners to:

- 1) Be confronted with **dynamic problems** that engage them in an authentic way in **experimentation and adaptation**.
- 2) Develop and apply new **knowledge and skills specific to their discipline** through relevant tasks and work tools linked to **clearly defined learning outcomes**.



- 3) Receive **authentic feedback** through **realistic interactions with the environment**, including instructors, supervisors, colleagues, and stakeholders.
- 4) **Reflect** on their actions and experiences and **be accountable** for their learning and performance outcomes.

This four-phase cycle promotes autonomy, metacognition, and transferable competency development.

2. The 3A Model: Autonomy, Authenticity, and Agency.

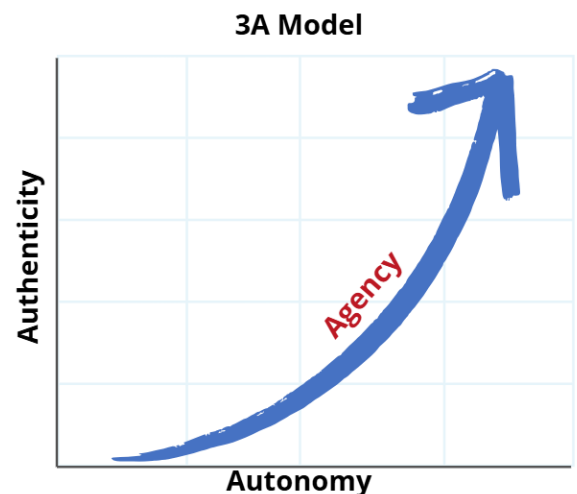
The 3A Model is both a conceptual and practical guide for designing experiential activities that build learner agency, the belief that one’s actions can create meaningful change. As described in the adjacent graph, Autonomy and Authenticity act as inseparable levers: students make real choices, face real consequences, and mobilize transferable skills. This balance fosters intrinsic motivation by nurturing both competence and autonomy. When learners are empowered to act authentically and autonomously, they develop a deeper sense of ownership, resilience, and motivation, the hallmarks of lifelong learning.

- **Autonomy:** A structural condition enabling learners to choose, plan, and act;
- **Authenticity:** Confronting ambiguity, navigating complexity, and facing real consequences;
- **Agency:** A motivational disposition believing one’s actions matter and can transform outcomes.

The 3A Model offers a developmental lens for scaling experiential intensity over time. When designing experiential learning (EL) activities, educators must also carefully consider how to scale autonomy and authenticity to align with the learner’s experience, developmental stage, and the complexity of the learning environment. Two key design constraints often come into play:

- **Novice learners** may require more structured and simplified activities to support foundational skill development.
- **Safety and ethical considerations** may require that activities be simulated or controlled to protect learners and other stakeholders.

Because experiential learning varies across disciplines and environments, authenticity cannot be universally defined. For instance, in clinical or high-risk fields, authenticity may involve simulated environments that approximate real-world complexity without compromising safety. However, one principle is clear: **Autonomy enables authenticity**



3. The uOCompetencies

The 11 [uOCompetencies](#) are part of uOttawa’s Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and define key transferable skills, mindsets, and forms of knowledge that students are expected to develop through EL. These competencies provide:

- A shared language across faculties to support competency-based education;
- Clear learning targets for students, enabling goal-setting using the SMARTS (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Rewarding, Time-Bound, Shared) formula;
- Anchors for feedback, reflection, and evaluation of competency development (Ramsay, 2024);
- A flexible and adaptable program of activities available through Brightspace, allowing alignment with specific course or program needs.



The uOCompetencies complement, rather than replace, disciplinary learning outcomes. They are particularly valuable in interdisciplinary or co-curricular contexts where program-specific competencies may not be explicitly defined.

Section 2: Scaling EL Across Campus

For an activity to be recognized as experiential at uOttawa, it must intentionally integrate the four core components of the EL cycle and reflect appropriate levels of learner autonomy and authenticity in its design.

2.1 Defining the Dimensions of the Experiential Cycle

These four components serve as the foundation for meaningful experiential learning design:

1. **Issue analysis:** Engage with dynamic problems
2. **Action strategies:** Apply disciplinary knowledge and skills
3. **Feedback integration:** Receive authentic feedback
4. **Outcome evaluation:** Reflect and be accountable

Consider the four stages of the learning activity cycle. Each stage can be designed along a continuum from “open” to “closed,” depending on the degree of learner choice, realism, and input. Instructors should intentionally assess the level of autonomy granted for each dimension. These elements influence how learners engage

with the experience and should be carefully calibrated to align with their developmental readiness and the course’s learning objectives.

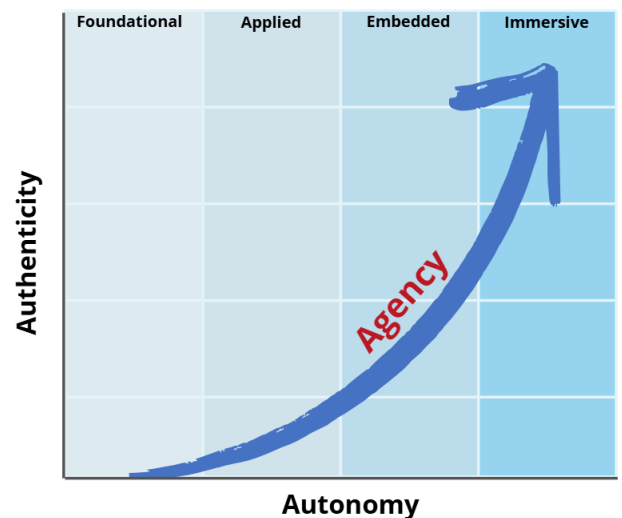
Dimension	Prompt	Closed	Open
Issue analysis	Does the activity allow learners to explore and adapt disciplinary knowledge, methods, and techniques?	The issue, expected outcomes and plan of action are defined by the professor.	The issue, expected outcomes and plan of action are defined by the learner.
Action strategies	Does the activity allow learners to develop their own roles and action strategies?	The responsibilities, tasks and tools are defined by the professor.	The responsibilities, tasks and tools are defined by the learner.
Feedback integration	Does the activity allow learners to identify and interact with feedback sources of their choice?	Interactions with stakeholders and the environment are defined by the professor.	Interactions with stakeholders and the environment are defined by the learner.
Outcome evaluation	Does the activity enable learners to reflect on their learning and take responsibility for it?	The professor defines responsibilities and holds the learner to account.	The learner defines responsibilities and ensures that they are honoured.

2.2 Tiered Categorization of EL Intensity

The EL Framework includes a tiered categorization system that organizes experiential activities into four progressive levels of intensity: Foundational, Applied, Embedded, and Immersive. Each level reflects increasing openness, real-world engagement, and learner independence.

For example, “Foundational” activities are more closed in structure, often limiting three of the four dimensions of autonomy associated with the core components of the Experiential Learning Cycle. This provides students with a structured, low-risk entry point into experiential learning, helping them build the skills and agency needed to engage in more open-ended, self-directed experiences.

Intensity Levels of Experiential Activities



As students move from Foundational to Immersive experiential activities, they often progress through increasingly complex cognitive tasks, such as shifting from applying and analyzing information to evaluating and creating new solutions. This developmental progression aligns with the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), which categorizes learning into six levels of increasing cognitive complexity: *Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, and Create*. Used alongside the EL Framework, Bloom's Taxonomy helps educators design learning outcomes and assessments that align both cognitive challenge and experiential complexity. In other words, students are not only engaged in meaningful experiences but are also being challenged at the right cognitive level for their stage of learning.

In practical terms, this tool enables instructors and curriculum designers to:

- Sequence EL activities logically across program years (e.g., yrs 1 to 4) or levels (e.g., undergrad, graduate, postdoctoral);
- Align learning experiences with student readiness and program learning outcomes;
- Identify which activities qualify for EL designation (e.g., IELTS).

By clarifying both the cognitive and experiential complexity of activities, this structure supports intentional curriculum design and consistent recognition of EL across the institution.

Each tier increases in autonomy, authenticity, and agency:

1. **Foundational** – Structured simulations, guided labs
2. **Applied** – Community projects, service learning
3. **Embedded** – Project-based or field courses
4. **Immersive** – CO-OP*, Self-Directed, Capstone courses or independent research

These tiers provide a pathway for progressive scaffolding of experiential learning across a program. **For example, CO-OP students begin with foundational activities in their first year and, as they gain experience through placements, engage in increasingly immersive opportunities.*

Recommended minimum levels are outlined below, but may vary considerably depending on discipline, program, course, or specific activities.

Activity level	Foundational	Applied	Embedded	Immersive
Learning outcome	Identify and describe fundamental concepts in a simplified or simulated context.	Apply established knowledge and methods to solve problems in a structured, real-world context.	Analyze and adapt disciplinary knowledge to respond to challenges in dynamic or collaborative environments.	Design and implement innovative solutions in complex, real-world or self-directed settings.
Minimum open dimensions (autonomy)	1 / 4	2 / 4	3 / 4	4 / 4
Minimum activity weighting (time)	20%	40%	60%	80%
Minimum course weighting (grade)	20%	20-40%	20-60%	20-80%

Section 3: Evaluating Learning from Experience

A critical component of EL assesses not just the outcome, but the learning process itself. This approach requires a shift from focusing solely on final products to evaluating how students grow, adapt, and make meaning through their experiences. Early-stage EL activities may rely on simpler prompts and structured tools, while more advanced opportunities call for students to take greater ownership, through portfolios, deliverables, and reflective justifications. This progression deepens authentic learning and equips evaluators to offer timely, targeted feedback.

Core Principles of EL Assessment

- **Intentional:** Aligned with clearly defined learning outcomes.
- **Observable:** Focused on behaviours or outputs that can be demonstrated or validated.
- **Developmental:** Designed to show growth over time.
- **Acceptable:** Sensitive to the learner’s identity and reflective context.
- **Varied:** Adapted to the type of competency being assessed.



Assessment Types: Formative vs. Summative

Understanding the timing and purpose of assessment is equally important. EL benefits from both formative and summative approaches, each serving distinct functions.

- **Formative assessment** supports learning as it happens. Tools like self-assessment check-ins, guided reflection, and SMART(S) goal planning help students process experiences in real time.
- **Summative assessment** documents learning at key milestones. Final reports, mentor feedback, and self-justifications serve to capture and validate growth at the end of a learning cycle.

Matching Tools to Learning Outcomes

Different types of learning call for different approaches:

- **Disciplinary knowledge** is often demonstrated through academic outputs like reports or presentations.
- **Professional competencies** such as teamwork or communication are typically observed through project work or peer feedback.
- **Metacognition and self-regulation** emerge in structured reflections, learning journals, and oral defences.
- **Transferable competencies**, such as collaboration and critical thinking, benefit from cumulative, multi-source evaluations and narrative feedback from external sources.

Developmental Rubrics and the uOCompetencies App

To support progression tracking, uOttawa uses a five-level rubric, from Exploring to Innovating (see Appendix 1) embedded in the [uOCompetencies App](#). Designed for both short-term EL activities (e.g., hackathons, workshops, in-class projects, case competitions) and semester-long experiences (e.g., Work-Study, CO-OP, Capstone projects, Self-Directed Courses), the app helps students document a wide range of learning and track their growth in both disciplinary and transferable competencies.

Students can record SMART(S) goals, reflect on progress, and receive structured feedback from mentors and supervisors. Its student-centred format allows learners to draw on their entries to support academic work or career planning by providing clear, authentic examples of growth and transferable skills. This structure reinforces accountability and grounds reflections in concrete actions, reducing filler writing and making growth more visible and verifiable.

By embedding the principles of **intentionality** and **reflection**, the app operationalizes the EL Framework in a practical and scalable way.

Resource: Mapping Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is not defined by *where* it happens, but *how* it happens. It emphasizes learner autonomy, critical reflection, and engagement with authentic tasks, regardless of the setting.

Work-integrated environments such as CO-OP placements or simulated work environments like teaching clinics, offer experiences that go beyond the traditional classroom. Similarly, laboratories, participatory or co-creation workshops, community placements, international programs, and land-based learning settings provide rich contexts for experiential learning. In all these environments, students are invited to engage meaningfully with their context, assume responsibility for their own learning, and build transferable skills.

Authenticity in EL is not defined by access to high-tech tools or realistic settings. Instead, it develops when learning activities demand greater learner autonomy across various factors such as planning, decision-making, and reflection.

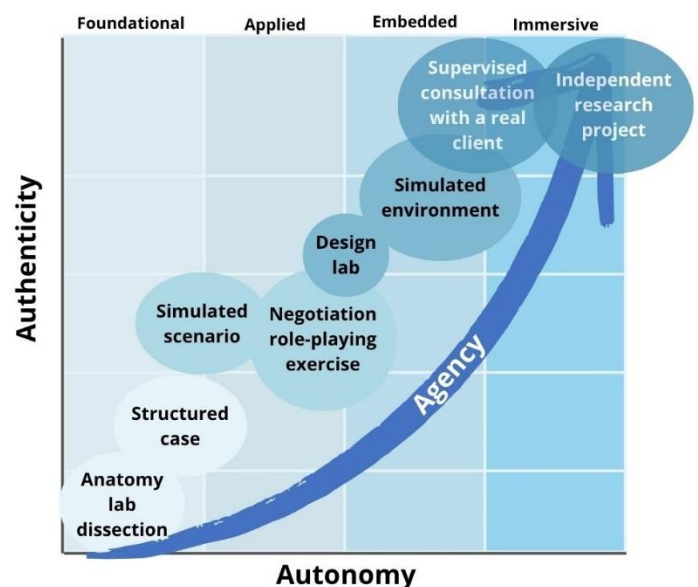
When designing or evaluating experiential learning opportunities, it is helpful to consider both the environments available and the range of activity types they can support. Mapping these dimensions can help instructors, programs, and services identify where EL is already occurring and where new opportunities could be developed or enhanced.

Mapping Tools

The graphic below provides sample classifications of experiential learning activities across the four tiers of intensity. These tiers represent a continuum of increasing autonomy and authenticity, each contributing progressively to the development of student agency.

While the examples provide guidance, activity classifications will vary based on context, intent, and instructional design. As the visual suggests, limiting learner autonomy, for example, by restricting control over tasks, methods, or outcomes, tends to reduce authenticity of the learning experience. Recognizing this relationship helps instructors and designers make intentional choices when mapping, planning or evaluating EL activities.

Experiential Activities Classified by Intensity Levels



The table below provides concrete illustrations of EL activities across different levels of openness and intensity. These limited examples can help instructors situate and adapt their activities.

Example	Autonomy	Authenticity	Activity level
Anatomy lab dissection	The problem, tasks and tools, and outcomes are defined by the professor.	Students interact with authentic anatomy in a context that limits the risk to learners and stakeholders	Foundational
Structured case	The problem, tasks and tools, and interactions are defined by the instructor	Students define and take responsibility for outcomes	Foundational
Simulated scenario	The problem and interactions are controlled by the professor	Students define roles, tasks, and tools, and are responsible for the simulated outcomes	Applied
Negotiation role-playing exercise	The problem and the roles and responsibilities are defined by the professor	Students regulate their interactions with others and take responsibility for outcomes	Applied
Design lab	The problem is defined by the professor and/or in collaboration with an external partner.	Students define roles and action strategies, regulate their interactions with the environment, and take responsibility for outcomes	Embedded
Simulated environment	Interactions are defined by the instructor	Students define the problem, define roles, and action strategies, and take responsibility for outcomes	Embedded
Supervised consultation with a real client	The professor only defines the general constraints of the learning activity (e.g., time and minimum standards)	Students define problems, develop roles and action strategies, interact with authentic environments and stakeholders, and take responsibility for outcomes	Immersive
Independent research project	The professor only defines the general constraints of the learning activity (e.g., time and minimum standards)	Students define problems, develop roles and action strategies, interact with authentic environments and stakeholders, and take responsibility for outcomes	Immersive

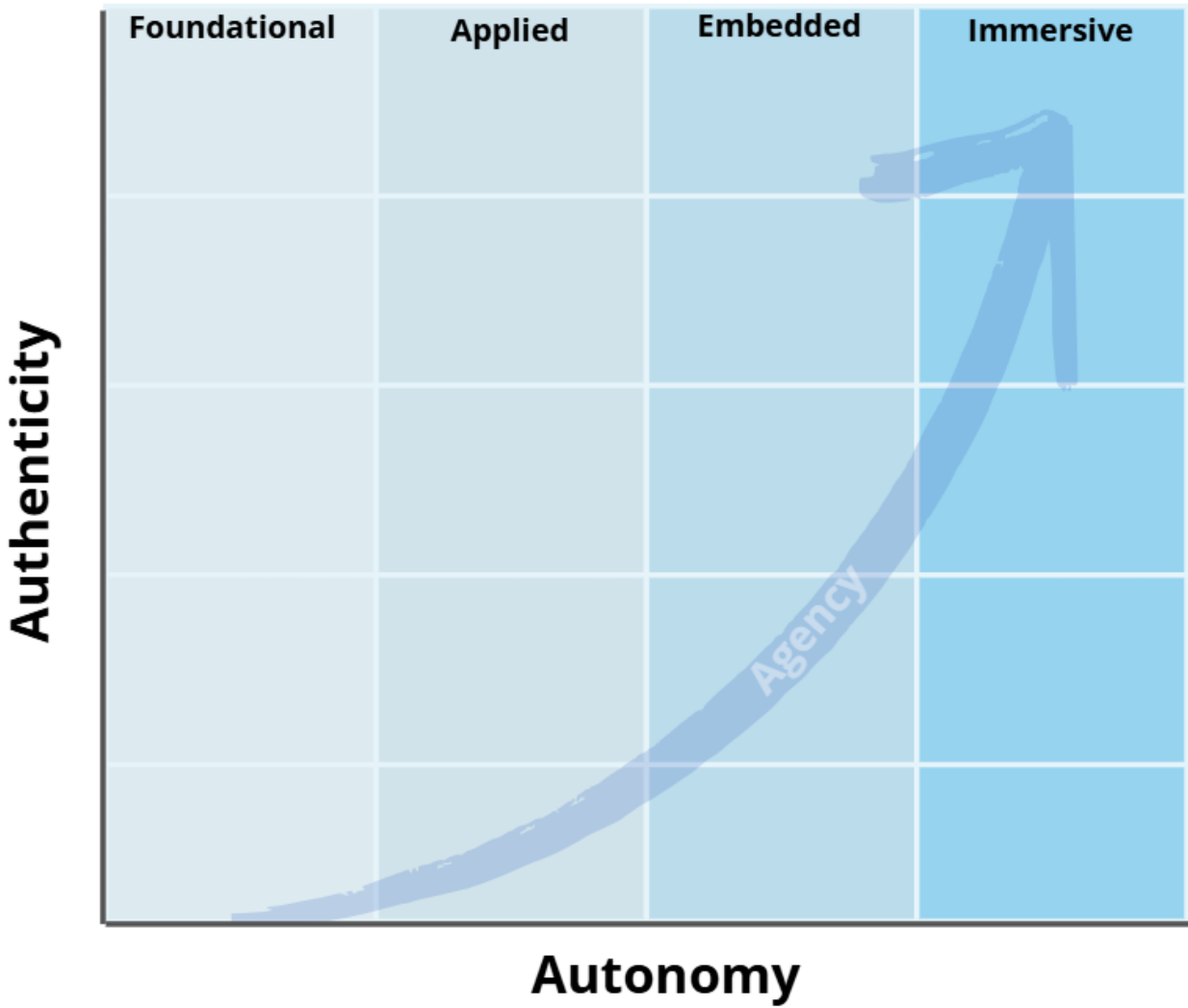


Optional activity: Mapping an EL activity

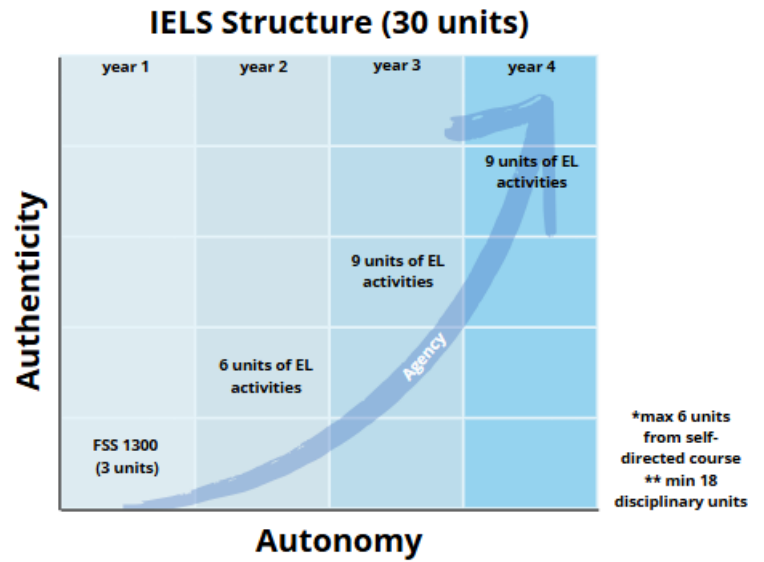
Identify open/closed dimensions of specific EL activities and total the score to categorize them. Continue by mapping EL activities on the graphs.

EL Activity :			
Dimension	Prompt	Closed	Open
Issue analysis	Does the activity problem allow learners to explore and adapt disciplinary knowledge, methods, and techniques?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action strategies	Does the activity allow learners to develop their own roles and action strategies?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback integration	Does the activity allow learners to identify and interact with feedback sources of their choice?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outcome evaluation	Does the activity allow learners to take responsibility for and reflect on learning and performance outcomes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total the number of open dimensions	Result: 1 open dimension: Fundamental 2 open dimensions: Applied 3 open dimensions: Embedded 4 open dimensions: Immersed		

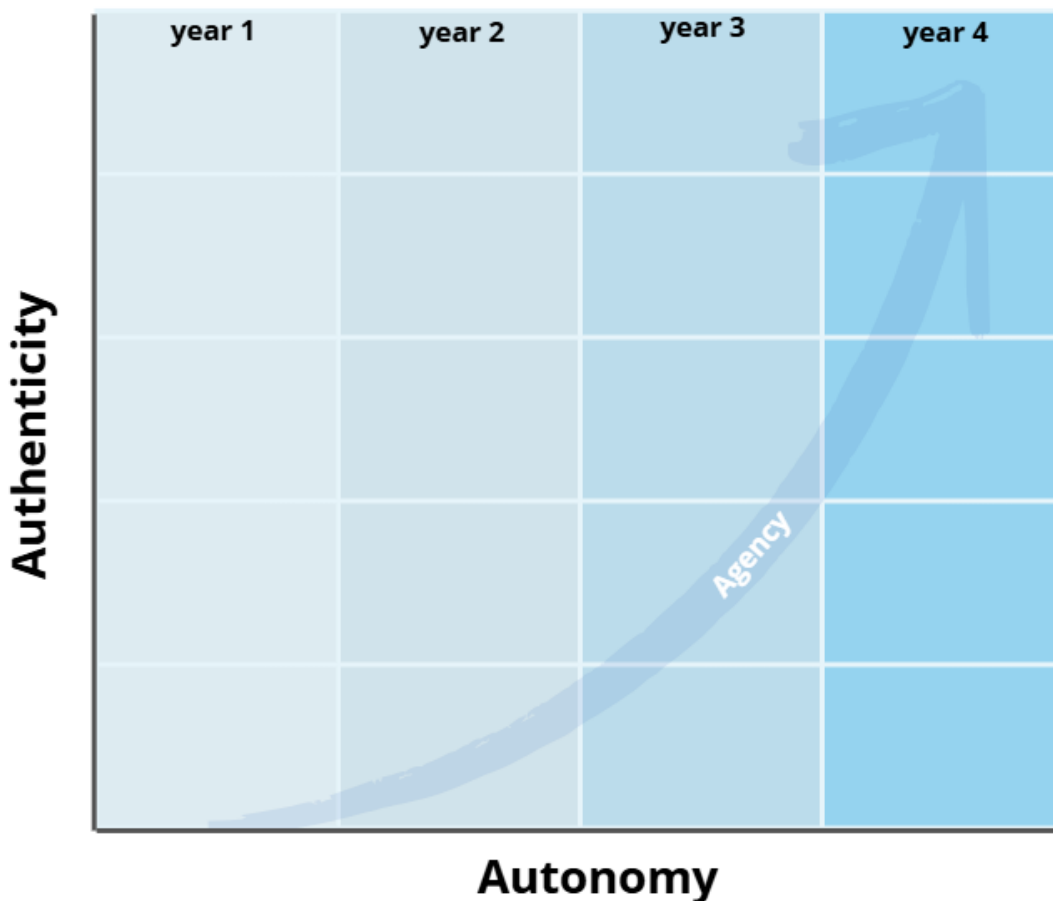
Intensity Levels of Experiential Activities



The In-depth Experiential Learning Stream (IELS) is a structured 30-credit undergraduate pathway composed of EL-labelled courses that build autonomy and authenticity over four years. The graph illustrates how students progress through foundational, applied, embedded, and immersive EL experiences, with increasing opportunities to demonstrate agency. Use this framework to map EL courses and activities across a multi-year structure.



Multi-Year EL Stream





Appendix 1: uOCompetencies Independence Scale- Level Definitions.

The uOCompetencies independence scale is an essential assessment rubric for guiding and documenting the achievement of course learning outcomes (CLOs) related to transferable skills. It allows for monitoring student progress throughout a course or EL activity, with an emphasis on the development of their autonomy.

The scale has five levels: **Exploring**, **Acquiring**, **Practicing**, **Excelling**, and **Innovating**. It stems from the uOCompetencies proficiency survey (Ramsay, 2024), which was inspired by the National Institutes of Health (NIH, 2023) proficiency scale and the University of Tennessee (UoT, 2015) model for improving the quality of experiential learning.

Students and their mentors can use it to track skill development in a structured way at different points in the journey (beginning, midway, end).

Here are the definitions for each level of development:

- **Exploring:** Common knowledge or understanding of basic techniques and concepts. Exploring the competency to better understand how to use it.
- **Acquiring:** Level of experience gained in a classroom and/or experiential scenarios. Shadowing and observing others practice the competency. Expected to need guidance when performing this skill.
- **Practicing:** Successfully replicates tasks in this competency based on previous experience. Typically performs the skill independently with occasional help from an expert.
- **Excelling:** Performs actions associated with this skill without assistance. Helps optimize and improve a task or process by using theories, research, and experience.
- **Innovating:** Uses theoretical and practical experiences to create and invent new competency resources and applications. Recognized ability to provide guidance, troubleshoot, and answer questions related to this area of expertise.

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