

Capstone 1 and 2 Design

*Thoughts for post-secondary institutions offering
CPA PEP accredited programs*

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Program Design

The CPA Professional Education Program (CPA PEP) consists of two core modules that all candidates are required to complete, two elective modules (candidates choose two of four modules), and two capstone modules. The core and elective modules have a national exam at the end of each module. The capstone modules are followed by the three-day national Common Final Examination. The Common Final Examination is considered to be the examination component of the Capstone modules.



The program has been designed based on specifications set out in two key documents, *Professional Education Program Framework for Development* (January 28, 2013) and *Educational Design for CPA Competencies* (Wolcott, 2013). Both Capstone 1 and Capstone 2 are designed to be delivered primarily online with one face-to-face workshop in each capstone module. The modules are meant to be completed on a part-time basis and should require between 15-17 hours of structured learning time per week for each candidate. The modules have been designed to encourage candidates to continue to work while they are completing the modules and should not require any significant time off from full time employment.

The purpose of this document is to illustrate certain key design features of the national CPA PEP capstone modules. This document should help post-secondary institutions (PSIs) develop their accredited programs to ensure equivalency to the CPA PEP modules.

Capstone 1 Design

Desired Learning Objectives

In Capstone 1, candidates are expected to learn about team management and how to communicate in a professional environment, as they deepen their strategic leadership competencies using the knowledge they have acquired in the prerequisite courses and modules.

Capstone 1 has four primary objectives:

1. continue the development of candidates' enabling competencies, particularly their teamwork and leadership, professional and ethical behaviour, problem-solving and decision-making, and communication competencies
2. simulate an authentic business problem, including gathering and evaluating relevant information, developing a written report, and preparing an oral presentation suitable for delivery to a board of directors or senior management team
3. prepare candidates for the Common Final Examination, particularly Day 1 which will draw on both the content and the skills developed in Capstone 1
continue the development of candidates' integration of technical competency areas
Secondary objectives include continuing the development of candidates' ability to:
 - solve problems and make decisions in contexts with significant integration opportunity, in situations with increased ambiguity and uncertainty
 - analyze problems where further information must be gathered
 - conclude and advise in situations where the decision criteria are difficult to determine or where competing decision criteria are present
 - conclude and advise in situations where creativity is encouraged to develop solutions that are not obvious

Module Context

Capstone 1 is closely modelled on the successful design of the CMA legacy Board Report although there are some key differences in the situational factors that result in some design differences. One of the most significant differences is that the Board Report is the final summative evaluation in the CMA

professional certification program (Strategic Leadership Program). In the CPA Professional Education Program, Capstone 1 focuses primarily on the educational aspects with some assessment components but relies primarily on the evaluation provided on Day 1 of the Common Final Examination for summative assessment.

Key aspects of Capstone 1 include:

- a significant written report that simulates a report to a board of directors or team of senior executives
- an oral team presentation that simulates a presentation to a board or team of senior executives
- structured time for questions and answers that simulates a question period from a board or team of senior executives

For a complete description of the purpose and learning objectives of Capstone 1, review pages 80-81 of *The Chartered Professional Accountant Competency Map* (2012).

Assessment

Capstone 1 is primarily suited for formative assessment rather than summative assessment due to the linkage with Day 1 of the Common Final Examination. While all aspects of Capstone 1 are important to the profession, not all will be replicated on Day 1 of the Common Final Examination. For instance oral communication, leadership, and teamwork competencies will not be competencies evaluated on the Common Final Examination so we have integrated summative assessment opportunities for those competencies within Capstone 1.

Integrating the key learning objectives discussed above with the key situational factors, we have incorporated three key learning activities that will be used to evaluate candidates:

1. Team reflections
2. Board report
3. Oral team presentations and question and answer period

Each of the three learning activities is described in more detail below.

Team reflections

There are five team reflections that are submitted during the module. These team reflections are a combination of three individual reflections and two peer evaluations. The team reflections are both a teaching and learning activity, as well as a formative assessment opportunity. For instance, the team reflections provide an opportunity for candidates to further develop some of the self-management and teamwork and leadership skills identified in the following competency statements:

- 4.1.1 Self-assesses and implements strategies to improve work performance
- 4.1.2 Evaluates whether work meets others' expectations
- 5.2.1 Demonstrates knowledge of group processes and dynamics
- 5.2.4 Commits to team success and takes an active role in team activities

The team reflections also help the facilitators and administrators assess the effectiveness of each team and provide an “early warning signal” if facilitator intervention and assistance may be required. In cases where individuals do not work effectively or respectfully within a team, we believe that the team reflections will provide sufficient evidence to justify preventing individual candidates from progressing to Capstone 2.

Individual reflections: These require candidates to individually reflect on how their team is functioning and how they, as individuals, have contributed to the team. Here are sample questions that can be used:

- Describe a situation in the past two weeks where your team worked effectively. What made that an effective experience?
- How did you contribute positively to the team in the past week?

Peer-evaluations: These require candidates to anonymously evaluate each of their peers and how each team member has contributed to the team. The results from these evaluations may or may not be shared with the individuals on the team.

Board report

The board report is the main content deliverable in this module. The purpose of the report is to:

- simulate an authentic report that would be suitable for a board of directors or senior executive team,
- provide underlying substance to develop teamwork,
- allow candidates to demonstrate their problem-solving and decision-making skills (enabling competency #2), and
- provide opportunity for candidates to develop their written communication skills (enabling competency #3)

The case for Capstone 1 is unlike other cases that candidates would have seen in the CPA PEP due to its complexity and length, its increased focus on strategic analysis, its integrative nature, its requirement for external research, and the potential for increased ambiguity and lack of directedness for critical variables and assumptions.

The CPA PEP team considers the board report primarily as a formative not summative assessment. The Capstone 1 case is an opportunity for candidates to practice and develop their problem-solving and decision-making skills in a unique context, in a team atmosphere. It is unlikely that a team submission would be unsatisfactory but we believe that if two of the three initial submissions are substandard, teams should receive a failing grade.

Drawing heavily on the discussion of formative assessment in *Educational Design for the CPA Competencies*, (Wolcott, 2013), we believe that the module should provide opportunities for teams to submit portions of the report, receive appropriate feedback that identifies corrective advice, and allows candidates the opportunity to revise and incorporate the feedback. We are conscious that this iterative process must focus on the skill development of the candidates rather than having candidates think they ‘missed the answer, what is the correct answer, just tell me the answer’. Guidelines for national program facilitators regarding appropriate types of feedback are being developed. Ultimately facilitators will be “teaching the candidates to fish” rather than “giving the fish away.”

We have broken the iterative cycle down into three portions to ensure that candidates are provided timely feedback. The first two portions follow the CPA Way:

1. **Assess the situation:** (Due at the end of week #2) This portion includes the industry analysis, company SWOT analysis, identification of key stakeholders and their interests etc. Facilitators are asked to provide constructive coaching comments and then arrange an optional coaching session with the team to discuss the feedback.
2. **Analysis:** (Due at the end of week #5) Candidates are expected to build off the work they completed in the first portion while incorporating feedback and revisions, and to complete sufficient quantitative and qualitative analysis. The facilitator’s constructive coaching comments at this stage could include the identification of alternative or better types of analysis tools that candidates can consider, pointing out key inputs that were not sufficiently justified or that additional sensitivity analysis would be useful. Again, optional coaching sessions would follow later so that the team could clarify and discuss the feedback with the facilitator.

3. **Teams' recommendations, conclusion, justification, and implementation:** (Due at the end of week #7) The final portion draws on the first two portions that had previously been submitted (and feedback provided). Facilitators would be providing feedback to the teams, particularly looking for consistency with the other portions that had previously been submitted, determining whether the recommendation was logical and appropriately supported, and whether the implementation plan was realistic and likely to create value for the key stakeholders. Again, the facilitator would be evaluating the submission to ensure it met the standard expected.

Team presentations and questions and answers

Panel evaluation: The third key learning activity is the requirement for teams to present their recommendations, conclusion, and implementation to a panel of evaluators. This presentation should mimic a high-level, 15-20 minute summary presentation to a board of directors or senior executive team. We will use a synchronous online environment (Skype etc.) for these presentations to avoid additional travel costs for candidates residing and working outside of the major centers.

The panel of presentation evaluators/questioners may be unfamiliar with the specific response of each team but should have a deep understanding of the case.

The question and answer period will be designed to ensure that each candidate is asked at least one question and that questions come from any portion of the case (and board report). The panel would identify which candidate was expected to answer each question. The purpose of this learning activity is twofold, it:

1. allows the panel to ask questions about the report (or at least the case) and then engage the candidate (or team) in a series of follow up questions, and
2. requires each candidate to be familiar with the full report, be comfortable thinking on their feet, and confident communicating the response.

Key competency statements addressed in this Q&A session include:

- 3.1.2 Asks appropriate questions to gather relevant information and clarify meaning
- 3.2.1 Communicates logically, clearly, and concisely
- 3.3.2 Adapts terminology, information content, and degree of detail for the intended user(s)

Peer evaluation: Capstone 1 also includes an opportunity for candidates to practice a team presentation (week #3) by preparing a short (~15 minute) video presentation (i.e. asynchronous). The topic of the practice presentation could be completely unrelated to the other learning activities discussed above, but should be a business topic. The teams would be presenting to a fictional board of directors. The key competencies addressed in this learning activity are virtually all of enabling competency #3, communication.

Assessment of this practice presentation should be done via peer review so that each team's presentation is peer reviewed by each individual from two other groups. For instance, in a cohort of three teams of five individuals, each presentation would be peer reviewed by ten individuals. The CPA PEP team believes that having the peer reviews done individually makes the peer reviews more effective and provides much better feedback to each team on their presentation. Facilitators would also be assessing the quality of the presentations.

Workshop Component

Similar to all the other modules in the CPA PEP, Capstone 1 has a two-day weekend, face-to-face workshop component. The workshop for Capstone 1 is scheduled for the first weekend of the module, to provide an opportunity for team members to meet each other, develop team agreements, practice presentation skills, and develop an action plan for completing the learning activities required during the module.

Capstone 1 Link to the Common Final Examination

Day 1 of the Common Final Examination “links” to the Capstone 1 case as demonstrated in the [samples](#) provided by CPA Canada.

Materials available to accredited programs

The Capstone 1 case links to Day 1 of the Common Final Examination and is therefore considered to be part of the overall national evaluation. The Capstone 1 case will be provided to all candidates in the CPA PEP and those enrolled in PSIs accredited programs one week in advance of the national start of each Capstone 1 module offering.

Faculty involved in teaching and delivering Capstone 1-equivalent portions of the accredited programs will be provided with the Capstone 1 case and sample solution approximately one month in advance of the national start of each Capstone 1 module offering. Access will only be provided if confidentiality and appropriate use agreements have been signed.

Conclusion

Capstone 1 is substantially different from the other modules in the CPA Professional Education Program due to its primary focus on the enabling competencies, team atmosphere, and direct link to Day 1 of the Common Final Examination. This design plan incorporates these key differences while maintaining consistent design philosophy with the other modules.

Capstone 2 Design

Desired Learning Objectives

Capstone 2 is the examination preparation module and focuses on preparing candidates for entry into the profession by requiring them to apply the competencies they have acquired throughout the CPA program in complex and highly integrative cases.

Capstone 2 has three primary objectives:

1. continue the development of candidates' enabling competencies, particularly their communication and self-management competencies
2. prepare candidates for all three days of the Common Final Examination
3. continue the development of candidates' integration of technical competency areas

During the module, candidates will receive a variety of feedback and support including:

- individualized feedback on case responses from a variety of sources including feedback from candidates' facilitators and the national marking centre
- technical knowledge support, particularly in the area of elective concentration
- results tracking and interpretation
- continuous individualized coaching by facilitators throughout the module
- feedback and guidance on the relevancy of information within case facts

Module Context

Capstone 2 is modelled on the successful design of the CASB UFE Preparation module although there are some key differences in the situational factors that result in design differences. The most significant differences relate to the new format of the Common Final Examination versus the legacy CA summative evaluation. Candidates will have multiple opportunities to develop general case writing skills, as well as specific skills required for each of the three days of the Common Final Examination.

For a complete description of the purpose and learning objectives of Capstone 2, review page 82 of *The Chartered Professional Accountant Competency Map* (2012).

Assessment

Capstone 2 has no module-specific examination since it immediately precedes the national Common Final Examination.

Workshop Component

Similar to all the other modules in the CPA PEP, Capstone 2 has a two-day weekend, face-to-face workshop component. The workshop for Capstone 2 is scheduled for the first weekend of the module to ensure candidates connect with their session leader/study mentor quickly and get immediate feedback on their general case writing skills.

Materials available to accredited programs

Two Day 1 CFE case examples developed by the curriculum team at CPA Canada are available for purchase by PSIs that are accredited up to Capstone 2. These examples are not developed by the team responsible for the CFE and therefore are only examples of what the Day 1 CFE case could look like.

All other materials developed for the national CPA Capstone 2 module are considered proprietary and will not be made available to accredited programs.

Conclusion

Capstone 2 is substantially different from the Core and Elective modules in the CPA Professional Education Program due to its primary focus on preparation for the Common Final Examination. This design plan incorporates that key difference while maintaining a consistent design philosophy across the program.



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