Strategic Curriculum Change in Research-Intensive Universities (0180)

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Abstract

In response to political, financial, social and academic drivers, a number of high-profile research-intensive universities have recently undergone major undergraduate curriculum change initiatives. This has in turn prompted other universities into action regarding updating not only the academic curriculum but into taking a wide view of the entire student experience. Findings from a HEFCE-funded project cover institutions on five continents and six countries, involving over twenty site visits. Three main dimensions of curriculum change are discussed: breadth versus depth; the degree of choice compared to structure; and the relationship between the formal and co-curriculum. We found that curriculum change is not something to be undertaken lightly. As it involves shifting power and resources, it is always a contentious issue and takes a considerable time to achieve.

Paper

Undergraduate curriculum change in research-intensive universities is part of global shifts in society, politics, economics, and education. In the competitive global knowledge economy, nations and institutions compete to attract the best and brightest staff and students. There is a world-wide trend toward massification in higher education, knowledge and skill specialisation, and credentialing (Collins, 2002; Trow, 2001). Although higher education systems are bound by characteristics within nations, global forces are changing the nature and purpose of higher education around the world (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; Morrow & Torres, 2000; Scott, 2006; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). There are various skills, attributes, and knowledge that students are expected to graduate with—much of which did not exist a generation ago. This has led to a general broadening of education at all levels, with increased levels of specialisation. Many universities have realised that the curriculum in place does not meet, or could better meet, the needs of society and students.

In light of this, significant numbers of research-intensive institutions across the world are reviewing their curricula, reflecting a sense of growing competition in an increasingly global market (Marginson, 2006). Institutions are also subject to domestic pressures, especially over issues such as employability and inclusion in the UK (Archer et al., 2003; Morley, 2001). However, the missions of the leading research-intensive UK Russell Group institutions have made the provision of an excellent student learning experience problematic; there is often a tension between the intensely discipline-based nature of research-led institutions and the need to develop attributes in learners that are of broad use in later life, including in employment.

A number of sources were drawn upon to explore curriculum change in research-intensive universities. A thorough initial web-survey was conducted to uncover what major initiatives were occurring in undergraduate curriculum change. Hundreds of institutions' web sites were checked; and the academic literature was reviewed, as well as the informal higher education literature. The institutions influencing curriculum change elsewhere were explored. A group of institutions that were leading international trends in undergraduate curriculum change emerged. A selection of these institutions was chosen for in-depth site-visits, representing a broad spectrum of curriculum change styles, outcomes, and phases within the

change process. Site visits allowed for in-depth conversations about the nature, purpose, processes and outcomes of curriculum change.

The curriculum was examined as a set of policies or requirements, but also as a process in which students engage. In analysing innovative practice elsewhere, we looked at the structure and content of curriculum change, as well as various curriculum characteristics. We saw that some institutions believed that the curriculum characteristics were simply present, infused in the curriculum. Others set out requirements and/or structured them into the curriculum. We also saw that responsibility to meet requirements was often on students, although some institutions provided more support from staff and others to embed the requirements in the formal and co-curriculum and assist students in meeting them. We also noted that undergraduate education is part of a pathway from schooling and then into employment and lifelong learning. We also noted the important role that professional and accrediting bodies play in influencing and supporting curriculum change.

We found three main dimensions of curriculum change. The first was the tension between breadth versus depth, with more institutions adopting a broader curriculum. This was done through expanding the length of the curriculum, adding general education requirements, interdisciplinary modules, and increasing flexibility. This was seen to provide a wider context for disciplinary knowledge, a greater set of skills and attributes, and to provide knowledge and ways of thinking necessary in a complex and constantly changing world. The second was the degree of choice or structure that was in the curriculum. Some related to level of prescription in general education requirements, but in many institutions the curriculum was opened up through decreasing or condensing disciplinary requirements. Several institutions acknowledged that without proper advising and mentoring there was a danger that the curriculum could lack coherence. The third dimension was the extent to which the co-curriculum was integrated with the formal academic curriculum. Some institutions set up graduate attributes that could be fulfilled through the formal or co-curriculum. Others linked these through residential initiatives, expanded academic records, and offering formal credit for work and volunteer experiences.

Those leading successful change paid continuing attention to the overall purpose or "big picture" providing the best education and experience for students. There were a number of common challenges faced during a curriculum change. Institutions often found it difficult to achieve agreement across the university and also reported that it was challenging to keep up the momentum of an initiative. It is essential that faculty are supportive of the direction and process of change. Successful change requires both a framework (top-down) and buy-in (bottom-up). If a change strategy is entirely top-down, faculty can become detached. Uncertainty in terms of resources, especially resource allocation, can lead to increased resistance. A change of senior leadership may not always be helpful in the implementation of a change. An important final lesson was about compromise. Many leaders noted that they discovered they were never going to please everyone.

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