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Strategic Curriculum Change: Global Trends (0124)

There are many broad influences that shape a curriculum, set its scope, and that provide a sense of coherence throughout the educational experience. Some of these are seen across a number of countries but, although there are similarities across the globe, the curriculum is always shaped by the local context. The sources of information about curriculum change are varied, often restricted-access, in addition to being sensitive and often work-in-progress. Therefore, to discover the heart of curriculum change—the intersection of the purposes of change, the forces affecting it, and the intended goals and the actual outcomes—a number of universities were visited that conducted or were conducting curriculum change initiatives (KLI, 2010). We concentrated on institutions recently active in curriculum change initiatives, from the beginning of the project in 2009.

As a result of this work, we discovered a group of institutions that were leading international trends in undergraduate curriculum change. We selected a subset of these institutions for comprehensive site-visits, which allowed us to have in-depth conversations about four main areas: the policies, purposes, processes, and outcomes of curriculum change. We met with senior administrators, disciplinary-based academics, and staff involved in curriculum change. All of the institutions grappled with these issues in different ways. This paper explores issues of intellectual and practical coherence and structure in curriculum change.

Institutions have reviewed the ways in which the formal curriculum is structured, in terms both of content and of processes. This has raised questions about coherence, particularly where a traditional emphasis on the learning of a discipline as the principal purpose of a higher education has been challenged. Many of the tensions within curriculum change were raised, including: challenges between breadth versus depth; structure versus choice; provision in the formal versus co-curriculum; disciplinary versus professional education; and theory versus practice.

It can be argued that most students do not become disciplinary-based academics or do postgraduate research and so need a more general education that prepares them for a work environment in which they are likely to change jobs and careers. Thus they need a broad range of abilities and the capacity to think clearly. A common approach for this is through the specification of general education requirements, introduced in a way that allows an institution to retain traditional disciplinary degree structures whilst offering exposure to other ways of thinking. A broad intellectual base rather than a narrow disciplinary one is the foundation of general education requirements. Many universities that conducted a university-wide curriculum change spoke of wanting common learning experiences for all students, including features such as experiential learning, common core courses, interdisciplinary exposure, and increased elective options.

This leads to coherence being a major issue in curriculum design, referring to the way in which the component parts of the curriculum fit together into a cohesive whole. Most institutions ensure coherence within disciplines through sequencing of knowledge and skill development. The availability of less structured elective options raises questions not just about the relationship between electives and majors, but about degree programmes themselves. There is a tension between student choice on the one hand and intellectual coherence on the other.

In analysing global practices in curriculum development, we looked at how such curriculum designs were put into practice. We found three main frameworks for enhancing existing curricula with broader choice, structuring curriculum characteristics, and increasing cross- and interdisciplinary provision. First, features and characteristics could be infused in the existing curriculum or embedded in new modules (e.g., communication skills). Second, these could be structured as required elements, again through existing courses or through new developments (e.g., foreign language requirements). Lastly, they could be structured throughout a degree programme, such as in core modules for all students or through distributed elective elements (e.g., "Solving World Problems" courses). We saw that institutions often placed the responsibility to meet such requirements on students, although some provided more support to embed these in the curriculum and assist students in meeting them.

The major challenge with offering provision beyond the discipline is the challenge of breadth versus depth in the curriculum. Many academics feel that undergraduate students do not have the disciplinary knowledge and understanding of subject methodology of one area to sufficiently tackle interdisciplinary learning. However, most practical societal concerns and methodological approaches do not fit within disciplinary boxes, such as 'Sustainability' courses or foundational 'Ways of Knowing' modules. Furthermore, interdisciplinary courses, whether infused into traditional structures or added through core modules, are often seen as taking away from traditional disciplinary learning and rigour in the curriculum. This said, some institutions were able to implement university-wide interdisciplinary modules, courses, and programmes with great success, others had to scale back grand plans, and some initiatives never made it into the classroom.

Some features can be added to the formal curriculum whilst others offered as optional elements or though the co-curriculum. Several institutions included work experience, internships, placements, or community volunteering experience in the curriculum. To link with the academic curriculum, this has to be organised at the local, (School, department or discipline) level, and therefore is very difficult to "universalise" across the university. Such activities are standard in some fields and disciplines, but do not align with other areas of study, further highlighting tensions listed above. In part this relates to the purpose of a degree. For example, some curricula include a significant level of vocational and professional training whilst others lend themselves more to a liberal arts "learning how to learn and think" approach.

However, how these characteristics were interpreted varied immensely across disciplinary, institutional and national settings, highlighting some of the key challenges of curriculum change initiatives. This brings to mind the normative cultural aspects to curriculum design, reform and processes of change. Although the curriculum can be researched comparatively, historical contexts, current issues, local structures, and political tensions always factor in curriculum change.

KLI (2010) Creating a 21st century curriculum: The King's-Warwick project. London: King's Learning Institute.