

Improving the student experience via a Connected Curriculum for the future: The holistic built environment and research based education (0159)

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A growing body of literature argues that creating synergies between research and teaching has a number of benefits relevant to improving the student experience. This paper aims to advance this work through a dual approach: it outlines an institution-wide enhancement strategy, the University College London Connected Curriculum, and focuses on how this relates to the physical university built environment. The empirical study, consisting of qualitative data gathered from three institutions, explores the perceived and real issues of implementing curricula changes from the perspective of the holistic physical university setting, both within and beyond the traditional learning environment. As such, the paper presents a snapshot of internationally gathered research framed in the context of an ambitious long-term goal of shifting an education paradigm. It is suggested that the ideas behind Connected Curriculum and its ethos of improving student experiences through research based education are directly relevant for university design in the future.

Part 2 Outline

956 words, not including references

The climate in which higher education institutions operate is under continuous flux; decreasing government funding and the knock-on effect of higher education fees is a particular driver in the national context in England. Within UK universities and beyond, the student experience – understanding it and improving it – is a key agenda, to ensure learners receive the most relevant and appropriate education possible. Coherent strategies must enhance the student experience while being flexible enough to respond to an uncertain climate in which students will graduate: we must foster flexible learning which prepares students to work in and thrive in an unknown future. A growing body of literature argues one way the student experience can be improved while also preparing students with the skills needed to succeed in a fast-changing future is by enhancing curriculum synergies between teaching and research (e.g. Brew 2012); bringing students closer to research and the production of knowledge has a number of benefits relevant to students' present experiences and future careers. This paper advances the theme of improving the student experience through a dual approach: at a more broad level, it outlines an institution-wide strategy for curriculum enhancement; and at the more specific level it focuses on how this relates to the physical university built environment.

The paper begins by discussing the long-term flexible 'Connected Curriculum' strategy for higher education at a research-intensive UK university, University College London (UCL) – it covers both its ethos and its flexible framework of six dimensions of connectivity (Fung 2014). While UCL has long-excelled in research, this agenda seeks to draw attention to its educational offering, while aspiring to be a global leader in the integration of both – leading to “an inspirational student experience” (UCL 2034). This new model – part of a recently launched twenty-year

vision and a wholesale commitment to changing UCL's programmes of study (Arthur 2014) – will enable students to participate in research and enquiry throughout their undergraduate years, while also building connections both vertically across programme year groups and horizontally across disciplinary divides, as well as beyond the university setting – out to alumni, employers and the wider community. While there is no doubt that Connected Curriculum is visionary in nature, an initiative of this magnitude can run up against some challenges, including the limits presented by the physical university setting, the particular focus of this study. The learning environment can offer both initial perceived challenges to staff and students as well as real hindrances to implementing a holistic research based education, which can seem compounded at institutions located in a densely urbanised setting.

After an initial framing of the UCL Connected Curriculum, the paper moves into the empirical body of the research, which begins to highlight findings from an on-going study at UCL, but also at two international research-intensive universities who are adopting similar student experience and education enhancement strategies – McMaster University in Canada and Wollongong University in Australia. The empirical study, consisting of qualitative data gathered from undergraduate students and university employees – teaching and academic staff, senior management, and colleagues in facilities and estates departments – explores the perceived and real issues of implementing curricula changes from the perspective of the physical university built environment. More specifically, the study aims to look at the holistic physical university setting, both within and beyond the traditional learning environment. Spaces discussed in the interview material include lecture theatres, classrooms, group and independent study space, both indoor and outdoor, and spaces for making connections with students across one's programme, across disciplines, with alumni and with the wider community, as well as with staff and their world-leading research. The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews ranging from 20 minutes through to one hour, which included photograph prompts of existing inadequately-designed environments as well as innovative learning, study and connection spaces. Conversations were held in person in London, Wollongong, and Melbourne, and over the Internet via Skype. Participants for the study were selected to offer a diverse window into multiple perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds. The international and comparative nature of the study allows for discussion of interesting issues pertaining to localised research based education in light of institutional structure, climate and suburban/urban location.

Along with outlining challenges of implementing an institution-wide research based education strategy in relation to existing university spaces, solutions are offered which range in scale, cost and time commitment, that can move beyond real and perceived space barriers. In doing so, the paper briefly presents a handful of innovative spaces at these three institutions, but also others cited in international universities. It is also suggested that the ideas behind Connected Curriculum and its ethos of improving student experience through research based education are directly relevant for university design for the future. In other words, students will need access to university spaces that are flexible, future-proofed, bold and creative (JISC 2006: 3), and which also facilitate connections in the widest sense, in formal and in informal settings (Jamison 2009; O'Donnell 2015). For a successful embedded research based education and an improved student experience it will be imperative that universities invest in the holistic physical built environment.

The paper aims to build a bridge between two bodies of scholarship which both relate to improving the student experience and educational offering: the work on research based education and the literature on university built environments. While the paper can only begin to uncover some of the empirical findings, in doing so it presents a snapshot of internationally gathered primary research framed in the context of UCL's ambitious long-term goal of shifting an education paradigm. Conference delegates will be encouraged to offer critical comments on the paper and the UCL Connected Curriculum, but also to share the ways in which their own institutions' built environment creatively facilitates (or hinders) an embedded research based education.

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