

Creators not consumers

Preparing students for a
complex world

WONKHE



Defining the curriculum

The process of students learning and developing knowledge and skills

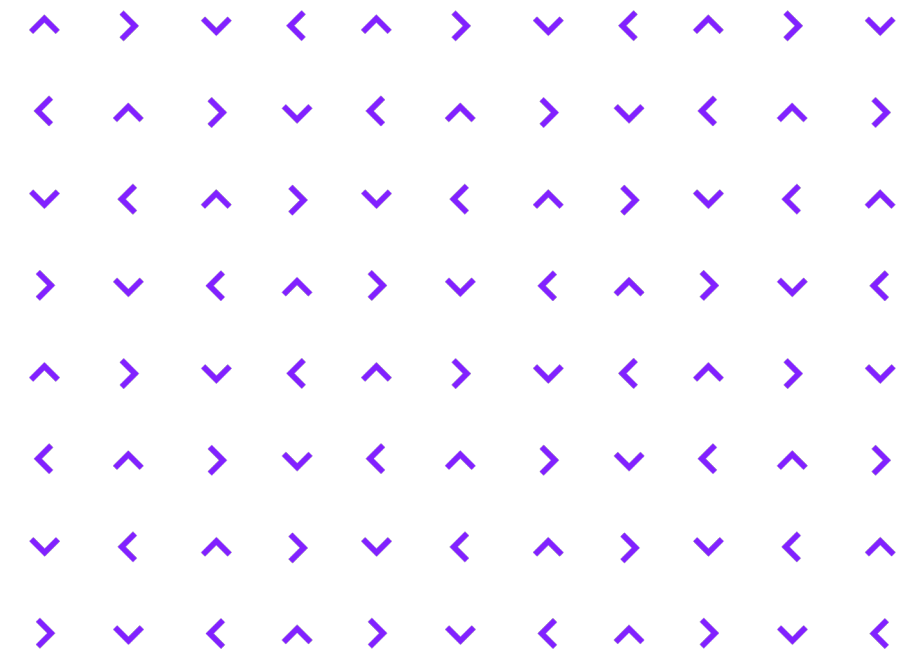
This might include:

- the topics covered in a course of study
- the kinds of learning activities students do eg group work, assessments

It also incorporates voluntary opportunities students have around their curriculum to take part in activities that will develop them such as student societies, internships, research or independent study, projects with employers, or study abroad.



Wonkhe/Adobe student research



Objectives

1. Gain a qualitative understanding of students' hopes and expectations for how the learning they undertake in their curriculum will help them thrive in their future lives.
2. Explore the relative value placed on digital literacy and capability to other kinds of generic* skills and capabilities students might aspire to develop.
3. Explore students' perceptions of what kinds of curriculum experiences do, or might, help to develop digital and other skills.
4. Understand the current state of practice in students influencing the curriculum and the extent students and their representative organisations are able to take part in conversations about curriculum.

*Specific topic areas relating to subjects, disciplines and professionals were excluded, though these did come up as examples.

Methodology and demographics

12 students' unions volunteered to conduct an online focus group on our behalf, working from a model discussion format that we provided and tested with SUs in advance. Each students' union submitted a report of their focus group, including direct quotes from students.

The unions involved were: Aberystwyth SU, Christ Church SU, Exeter Guild, Newman SU, Liverpool Guild, Plymouth SU, Portsmouth SU, Southampton SU, Manchester SU, Manchester Metropolitan SU, Durham SU, Sheffield SU.

105 students from a range of subject disciplines took part in the research of which:

Gender: 71% female | 24% male

Age: 51% 18-21 | 40% 22-29 | 9% 30+

Ethnicity: 62% white | 23% Asian | 7% black

Domicile:

Level of study

Disability:

Most - around 80% - were **course reps**

Students' hopes for the future

- Students were clear about how their university curriculum can help them achieve their goals – many spoke about generic skills such as time-management, data analysis, research, communication, and groupwork.
- Students also spoke about how university “changes how you think and feel” and the importance of developing a particular mindset: self-discipline, and confidence. There was strong alignment between students’ values and their future plans.
- The co-curriculum emerged as a particularly valuable creative space that shaped students’ sense of what they might do in future. Though engaging in opportunities (eg student societies, placements, peer-assisted learning) students’ options and sense of possibility expanded.
- Building networks and connections while at university was perceived as an essential element of preparation for the future.
- Students also spoke about aspirations for achieving work/life balance, and good health and wellbeing in their future
- Pathfinding is a challenge, with students keen to get more help in matching choices of modules and co-curricular activities to their future life plans.

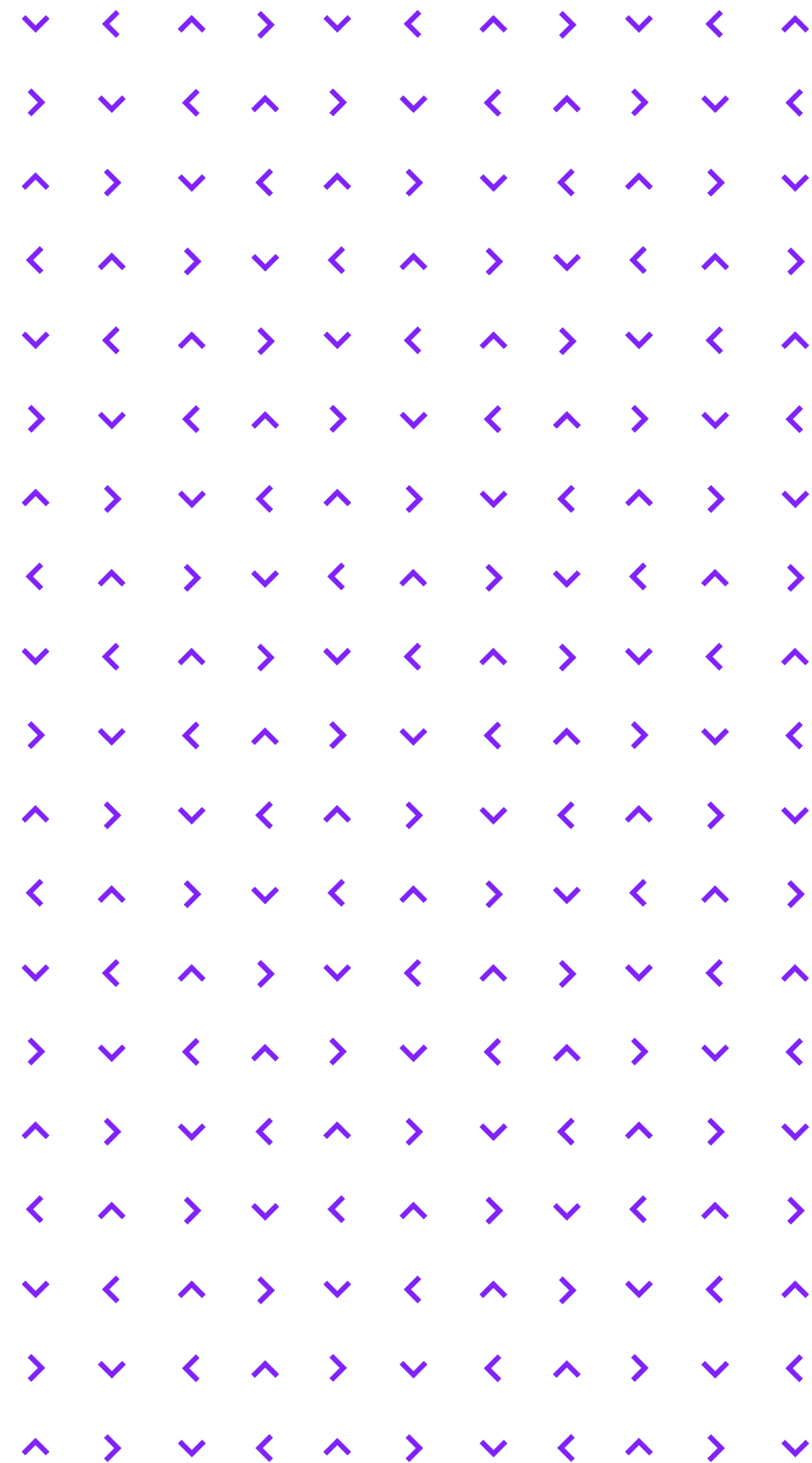
“I came to university for a new experience and to build my skill set. I chose my course to learn more about the environment we live in and change public perception, reduce the destruction to ecosystems and reduce the use of finite resources.” (Student, University of Plymouth)

My course encourages interdisciplinarity, challenging competing theories and models in order to work out the pathway for the subject and my future. This is vitally important.” (Student, Newman University)

“I want to tackle issues surrounding underrepresented groups in the beauty industry.” (Student, Manchester Metropolitan University)

Digital literacy and the curriculum

- Students were universally clear that digital literacy is very important for their academic success and future plans.
- Digital was understood to have value in saving time, facilitating collaboration, and opening up opportunities for creativity and new - potentially global - connections and access to the latest research and thinking. The importance of effective digital communication was widely referenced.
- But in most cases, the digital tools and platforms students had in mind were not especially advanced.
- Asked to think about what kinds of activities in the curriculum support digital literacy students were keen on diverse and creative forms of assessment.
- They emphasised the value of activities that have a “real-life” application and make use of “real life” examples.
- Students saw digital literacy as enabled through the embedding of digital into other activities such as research, group work, project planning, conducting surveys and undertaking data analysis.
- Students welcomed opportunities to learn digital skills from peers, and to learn by doing.



Issues to consider

- Students reported that on arrival at university it was assumed their levels of digital literacy were higher than they actually were. As a result many felt nervous about asking for help.
- Students said they would welcome more support with adopting appropriate online etiquette and social codes and good practice for online communications. Digital fatigue was also a concern.
- The digital divide was an ever-present issue, with costs, accessibility, connectivity, porting software across devices, and learning across time zones mentioned frequently.
- Students felt their experience of developing digital literacy depended heavily on the digital literacy of their lecturers.
- Students did not always feel they had sight of the digital skills they were developing and some struggled to articulate the link between their curriculum and their developing digital literacy.



Students influencing the curriculum

Students attending felt they personally, as course reps, had good relationships with academic staff and felt able to open up a discussion about the curriculum.

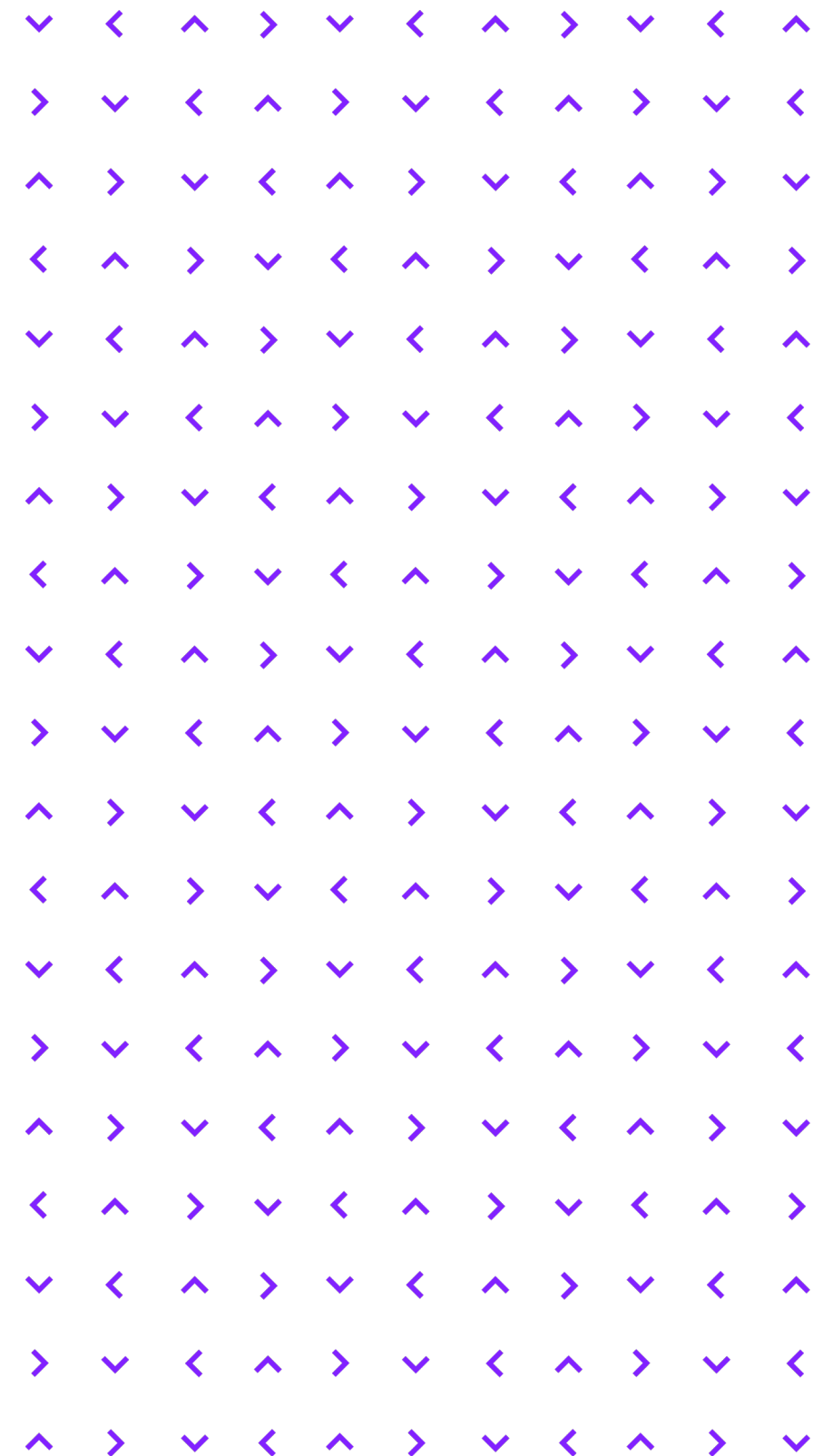
However:

- This was not the case everywhere. Many students said they did not feel they had the confidence or permission to discuss the curriculum, or had cultural reservations about “criticising” the curriculum.
- The wider student body has relatively poor access to these conversations

Students were not always confident in the possibility of change. Some felt the conversations happen too late to change things. Some had been told that accreditation bodies would not permit change. For others it was implied or explicit that staff themselves did not feel they had the authority to make a change.

Some students had been involved in curriculum change campaigns – eg a campaign to have people of colour represented in dermatology textbooks showing examples of different skin complaints.

Students wanted more open and informal opportunities to discuss the curriculum, such as debate events, or student forums, as well as discussion about the curriculum embedded in the curriculum.



Thank you

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