

Future-proofing the curriculum for student and university success

Wonkhe x Adobe | July 2023

WONKHE



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Introduction from Wonkhe and Adobe

Wonkhe and Adobe are thrilled to be sharing the findings of our latest investigation into how universities are transforming learning experiences to prepare students to thrive in their future lives. This report explores curriculum transformation from the perspective of university and subject leaders, with a specific focus on multi-faculty research intensive universities – arguably the context where curriculum is most contested, and the power to drive change is most dispersed.

The conversations that we have had during the spring and summer of 2023 with leaders from different universities challenge the cliché of institutions that are inward looking and slow to change. Despite the difficulties of recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, and the return to the classroom, the university leaders we spoke to are committed, not only to creating a learning environment, pedagogy, and curriculum that prepare students to face the future with confidence, but to supporting academic and professional staff to connect and collaborate, and to exercise their freedom and creativity in the cause of engaging students in their subjects.

The advancement of university learning is intimately bound up with developments in digital technology. Digital fluency for staff and students is interwoven throughout curriculum change agendas, not just as an outcome, but as an enabler of the kind of agentive, authentic pedagogies that we are seeing emerge. As we continue our work into the next academic year we'll be working with student representatives on what they want to see from the higher education curriculum, and in the autumn we'll be thinking about how higher education can start to tell new stories about how, far from being detached from the “real world”, higher education teaching and learning is designed to immerse students in some of the most complex challenges of the contemporary era.

To keep up to speed with our work, and to contribute to the conversation, join us at one of our regular Wonkhe x Adobe [Education Espresso](#) events.



Debbie McVitty
Editor
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Mark Andrews
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Key findings

1

Universities are changing curriculum less out of necessity than out of opportunity – the opportunity to tell a fresh story about the value and purpose of higher education, and enable an increasingly diverse student community to thrive during their time at university and make an impact in their future lives.

2

The kinds of change we are seeing are about working collaboratively to build structured programmes of study that authentically integrate research and teaching; disciplinary knowledge and “real world” challenges; expert insight and student agency. It’s fundamentally creative work.

3

Change is enabled when people are brought together purposively to work on a shared agenda – and given both the space to interpret that agenda for their context, and the development, resource and support to deliver it.

“It’s about the future - future-proofing core business so that we are enabling students to fly: to make the most positive contributions to global challenges, hit the ground running, have skills, values, competences that employers need - and to do that via an education that is authentic and reflects real-world environments.”

Sarah Speight, pro vice chancellor for education and student experience, University of Nottingham



About the research

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Why are universities changing curricula – how does curriculum change serve universities’ aspirations for institutional and student success?
- What is changing in curriculum and what is driving those changes?
- How does curriculum change happen in large multi-faculty universities?*
- What are the impacts of curriculum change agendas?

* We focused our attention predominantly on research-intensive universities, on the basis that these tend to be large organisations in which the constituent elements have significant autonomy and would, in theory, therefore be among the more challenging environments in which to create institutional change.

The research was conducted between April and June 2023 and comprises:

- Eight one to one conversations with education leaders in universities, predominantly pro vice chancellors
- One online round table with leaders of learning and teaching, held under Chatham House rules
- Five online round tables for faculty leaders focusing on curriculum change in subject areas: humanities, social sciences, business, physical sciences, and medical and life sciences.
- One online Education Espresso event where we shared the early findings and sought feedback.

The authors would like to thank the individuals who took the time to share their thinking and practice with us, some of whom are named in this document, others of whom are quoted anonymously.

“We want to make sure that when Imperial graduates a student in Physics, employers and other universities are confident that this is someone not only with gold standard skills and knowledge in terms of what is expected for today’s careers, but that this is also someone who is prepared for the future roles that will exist in 20 years’ time but which we can’t yet imagine because the pace of change is accelerating all the time.”

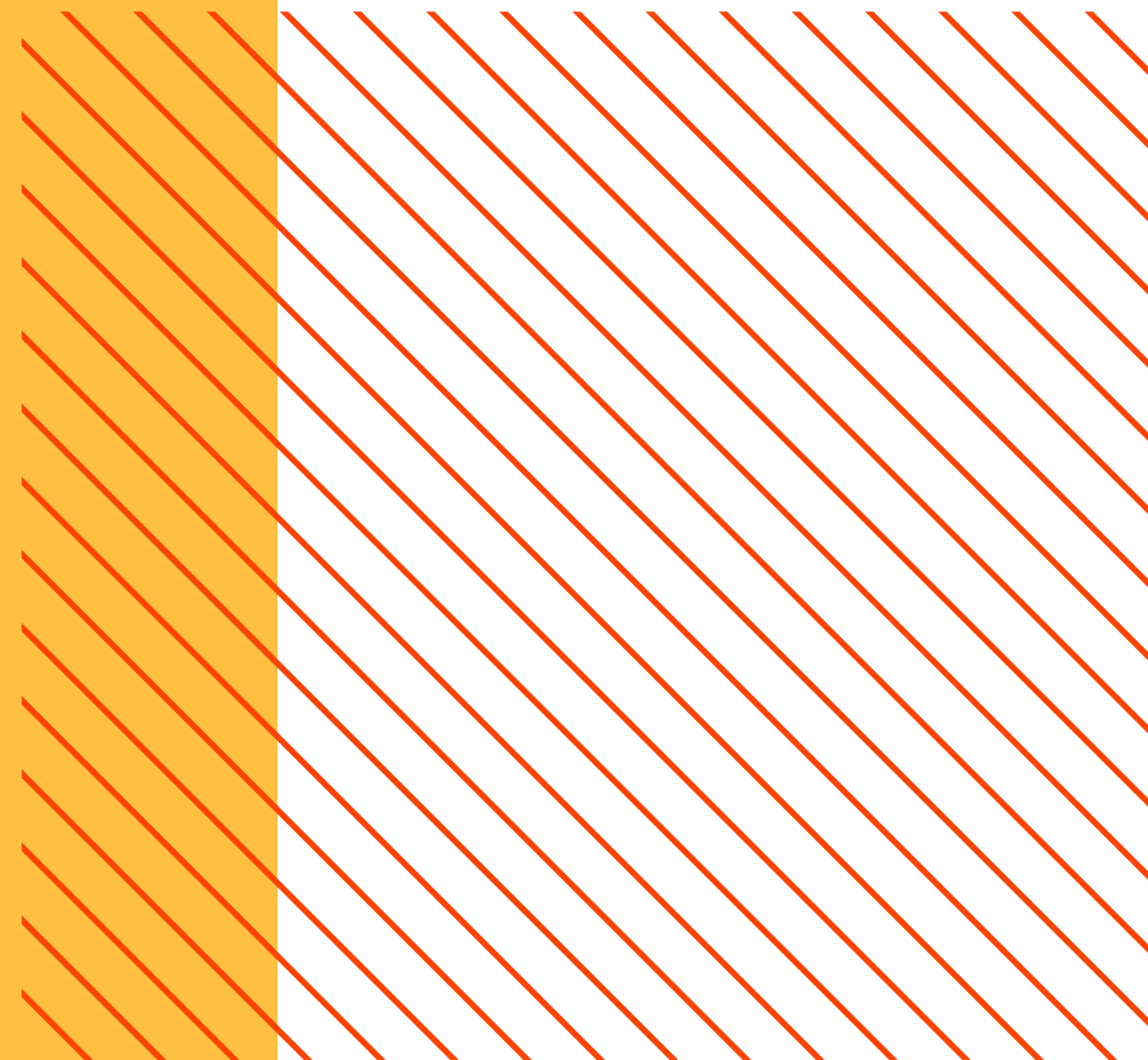
Peter Haynes, vice provost (education and student experience), Imperial College London

Why change the curriculum?

To affirm shared educational purpose

To prepare student to thrive

For university success and sustainability



To affirm shared educational purpose

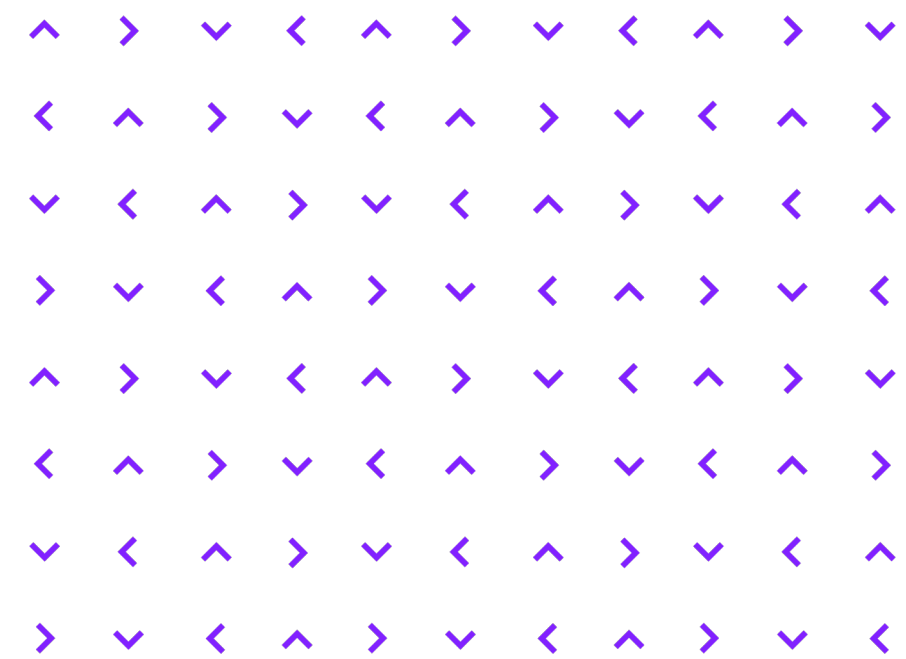
Participation in higher education continues to grow and students and the variety of educational journeys they pursue continue to become more diverse. Nationally and internationally universities are under pressure to differentiate themselves to support student recruitment.

There is a regulatory expectation that universities should demonstrate good student outcomes, especially progression to graduate-level employment- in part in acknowledgement of the diversity of students and the barriers they face. The Teaching Excellence Framework encourages whole-institution narratives and focus on education gain.

The challenge for university leaders is to acknowledge and respond to these realities with energy and determination – taking the opportunity to return to and reflect on the core purpose and value of university study.

There's a consciousness of an opportunity to reset the social compact between universities and the wider world; a need to communicate a narrative of why higher education matters and how it prepares student to thrive – and what kinds of pedagogies and learning experiences will help them do so.

The social meaning of university study can no longer be tacit or taken for granted, but the need to (re)articulate it creates possibilities for greater clarity of shared purpose, and space for innovation. Discussions about curriculum are not confined to academic staff; they include students, alumni, employers, local community and regional partners, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBS) and funders, among others.



“Curriculum Redefined isn’t problem seeking or problem solving in its orientation, it is opportunity-seeking - the opportunity to make a generational change in how we educate students at the university - what we teach and how we teach it. It is driven by the larger university strategy about having impact in relation to grand challenges articulated by the UN sustainable development goals framework - given what universities need to be for the future, how do we need to educate people to take their place in the world and do what’s meaningful to them?”

Jeff Grabill, deputy vice chancellor student education, University of Leeds

To prepare students to thrive

Curriculum transformation agendas are responding to the needs of the current generation of students. Students are arriving at university with a wider range of needs and expectations. Student employability is one important facet of success but this is situated in a broader agenda for inclusion, engagement, and development.

STUDENTS' LEARNING

Building transformative student educational journeys that are coherent, that have a developmental trajectory, that are engaging, and that develop – and enable students to articulate – relevant skills, capabilities and competences.

STUDENTS' LIVES

Recognising the complexity of students' lives, and the need for some degree of flexibility and predictability for commuter students, those in employment, and those with caring responsibilities to able to engage as best they can and in ways that work for them.

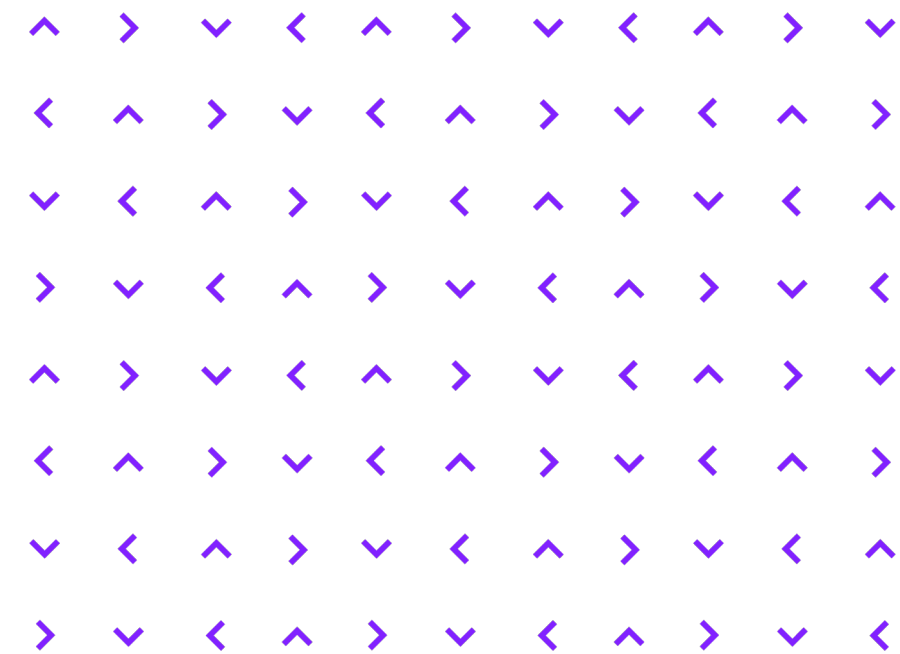
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STUDENTS' WELLBEING

Addressing issues of belonging, inclusion, and mental wellbeing in curriculum structures – and mobilising curriculum as a space where students can grow and change, develop themselves and their interests, and exercise agency.

“When you have local students, lots of commuter students, lots holding down jobs of more than 20 hours a week, lots from low participation areas or first in family - we can't keep trying to adhere to and deliver traditional timetabled courses where we say 'you must be on campus for these scattered times per week and we'll monitor your attendance and you're going to be spending ten pounds or more to get to campus' - all of that needs to be brought into our thinking around curriculum transformation. It now needs to be much more student-centric in terms of how the curriculum looks and feels, and how compassionate it is. We tend to think of student experience as being about the 'sticky campus' being lively and fun but for a lot of students it's about getting to the end of the week in one piece.”

Graham Wynn, pro vice chancellor for education, Northumbria University



For university success and sustainability

Curriculum transformation seeks to rationalise and reduce complexity. Over the years courses can become more complicated and resource-intensive, with greater burden on university teaching and administrative staff.

STAFF EXPERIENCE

University staff are still feeling the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and for some change can sometimes feel like an imposition rather than an opportunity.

Curriculum transformation agendas are explicitly mindful of achieving benefits for educators, whether in reducing workload, building in better recognition for excellence and leadership of learning and teaching, or supporting closer intellectual connection between teaching and research.

For some it's simply about putting the joy and creativity back into teaching.

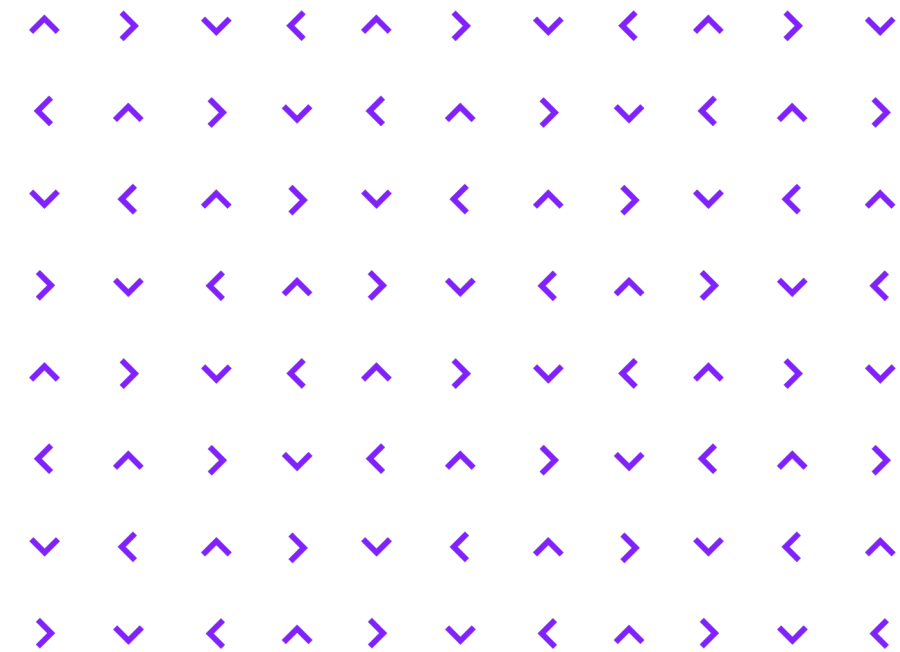
INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

Rationalising programme pathways, achieving consistency between content, assessment, and credit awarded, and reviewing the range of modules available helps to ensure that resources are being used where they can have the most impact.

At a time of growing costs and limited resource, all universities are thinking about their longer term financial sustainability.

“Realising benefits to academic staff is part of the theory of change - people need to see how they can have more learning, less work, and more fun - those give people a reason to push through.”

Tansy Jessop, pro vice chancellor for education and students, University of Bristol

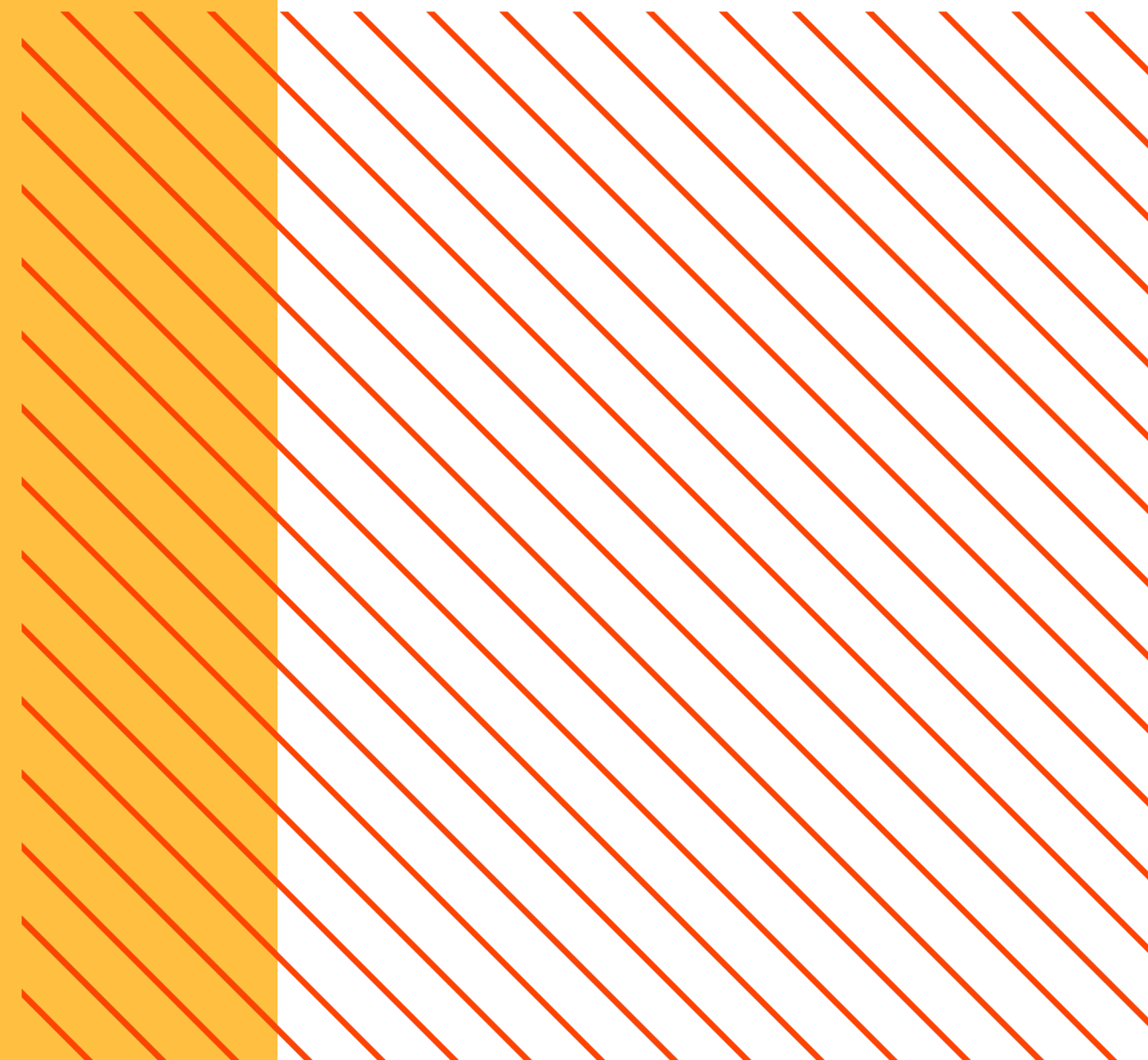


What is changing in curriculum?

More authentic: bringing together disciplinary knowledge with “real world” professional practice

More holistic: integrating co-curricular activity as curriculum

More structured: focused on student development towards outcomes to create a sense of a learning journey



A more authentic curriculum

“Authenticity” in a narrow definition has traditionally implied “mirroring employment environments” but we’re seeing it used in a broader sense - capturing a sense of responsiveness to a changing world, and a desire for students to understand how different kinds of knowledge can be mobilised to make a difference in the world. Integrating authentic disciplinary knowledge and “real world” professional practice throughout the curriculum is perhaps the key intellectual challenge for academics working on curriculum change.

The ways that different disciplines produce and apply knowledge through **research** is a form of authenticity – curriculum change must answer how students engage with research methods, knowledge exchange, and research outputs at points on their learning journey.

Some are aiming to embed **interdisciplinarity** in some form – either giving students experience of learning in a different discipline, or working with others in multi-disciplinary teams or learning contexts. The change in perspective makes visible the way their “home” discipline works and offers novel knowledge and skills perspectives. This can be impactful within disciplinary groupings eg medicine and health professions, as well as across faculties.

Experiential learning – traditionally through external placements, but also through tackling live projects, service learning, through structured co-curricular activity, or other forms of practice – can be exciting and engaging for students, but also requires different pedagogies, resourcing, and support.

Authentic **assessment** is seen as an essential tool in framing curriculum change – setting the expectation for authenticity to be woven throughout a programme.

“We said you need to think about what research looks like in your discipline - methodologies, ethical issues, audiences, outputs - is that how research is showing up in your curriculum or is it just a specialist module or third year dissertation? We need to be weaving it through in authentic and creative ways.”

Elizabeth McCrum, pro vice chancellor education and student experience, University of Reading

“We want to bring a lot more authenticity - experiential learning, working with external partners, live brief projects that are cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary - so that students can feel they are making a contribution in the world, that it’s not just simulated – we want to build these into every curriculum by 2030.”

Graham Wynn, Northumbria

“We look at how assessments are aligned with course learning outcomes to ensure that students aren’t being assessed over and over again on the same things in different modules, making sure we are not over-assessing, and making sure our assessments are authentic. I use this as leverage to rethink our curriculum.” **Dean, social sciences.**



A more holistic curriculum

Traditionally, there has been a differentiation between the “core” (compulsory) curriculum, focused on academic knowledge and the range of extra-curricular opportunities students have available to develop their wider skills and competencies. There is now increasingly concern that this arrangement tends to advantage students with the time, resource, and social capital to access extra-curricular opportunities. To accommodate the complexity of students’ lives and develop good outcomes for all students, universities are looking at where these kinds of experiential opportunities can be supported.

Mobilising the co-curriculum supports the move towards authenticity because it creates space for students to learn from experience, connect into the professional world and the skills associated with it, and experiment with learning in a different way, using different tools, or in a different subject area.

All this requires students to recognise the value of engaging in co-curricular activity in this way, have the confidence to participate fully, and understand how it will support them on their journey towards graduation and in their future lives.

Some students are sceptical of the idea of “skills development” when it comes divorced from disciplinary or professional knowledge; others are nervous about “failing” by doing something they have not tried before. There is an underlying question about how the curriculum can build students’ agency to develop themselves and take charge of their own futures.

“Co-curriculum...as part of our institution-wide curriculum review it became compulsory to take an I-Explore module within year 2 or 3 of our undergraduate programmes - for credit students can choose from a Horizons course, with a range of offers in humanities, social sciences, languages and so on; a Business School course; a STEM module outside their own discipline; or undertake a multidisciplinary project.”

Peter Haynes, Imperial College London

“Core curriculum is a very traditional way of looking at things. We are educating complex human beings that have the opportunity to transform the world, and we have to provide that kind of education that blends curriculum and extra curriculum.”

Dean, humanities

“Curriculum change is about people’s lives and their successful futures, not just their careers. It’s not just what you know, it’s how you know it; it’s what you know about yourself – this is a way of thinking that puts the person right at the centre. You can have a first class degree that doesn’t get you the plum job, and that opportunity is not equally distributed among students. So what we’re trying to do is make it structurally unavoidable to develop these graduate capitals - if you come to university but have to work part time and all that voluntary stuff is not available there will be things that are structurally available to you in your programme.”

Deborah Gill, vice president education, University of Southampton



A more structured journey through curriculum

The move towards programme design is becoming increasingly pronounced – modular structures can discourage students from applying their learning across modules, and they tend to mean that students are assessed more frequently than is really necessary to establish they have achieved programme-level learning outcomes. Students may be assessed repeatedly on some skills while others are left out entirely.

Graduate attribute frameworks, or curriculum frameworks, can help to articulate the broad objectives of a given programme. Within that, there is often work to be done to break down the constituent elements and the stages of student development as they relate to the specific discipline and programme-level learning outcomes.

This means that skills development can be more distributed across programmes, that assessment load can be reduced, that co-curriculum can be integrated, and that attention can be paid to moments of transition, with targeted support for students as appropriate – and, crucially, that the overall learning experience for students feels more like a structured, supported journey.

Importantly for enabling change, this move also tends to bring teams of academic and professional staff together to collaborate on programme design, rather than individual academics leading modules or units alone – allowing for a more supportive, creative design process.

“You can’t ever teach everything in a university programme. Still, you can develop an attitude where a student graduates to consider what are the players in the market, and how they can solve problems - maybe by doing it entirely differently. This is far more important than the few examples we may have taught them.”

Dean, physical sciences

“For me, it’s not so much about what you study but how you study. The thing I want to instil in my colleagues is ‘What does this course stand for? What do we want our students to be able to do when they leave? How do we expect them to be critical and creative?’ And the skills are part of the teaching and learning experience. It is one coherent ball of stuff.”

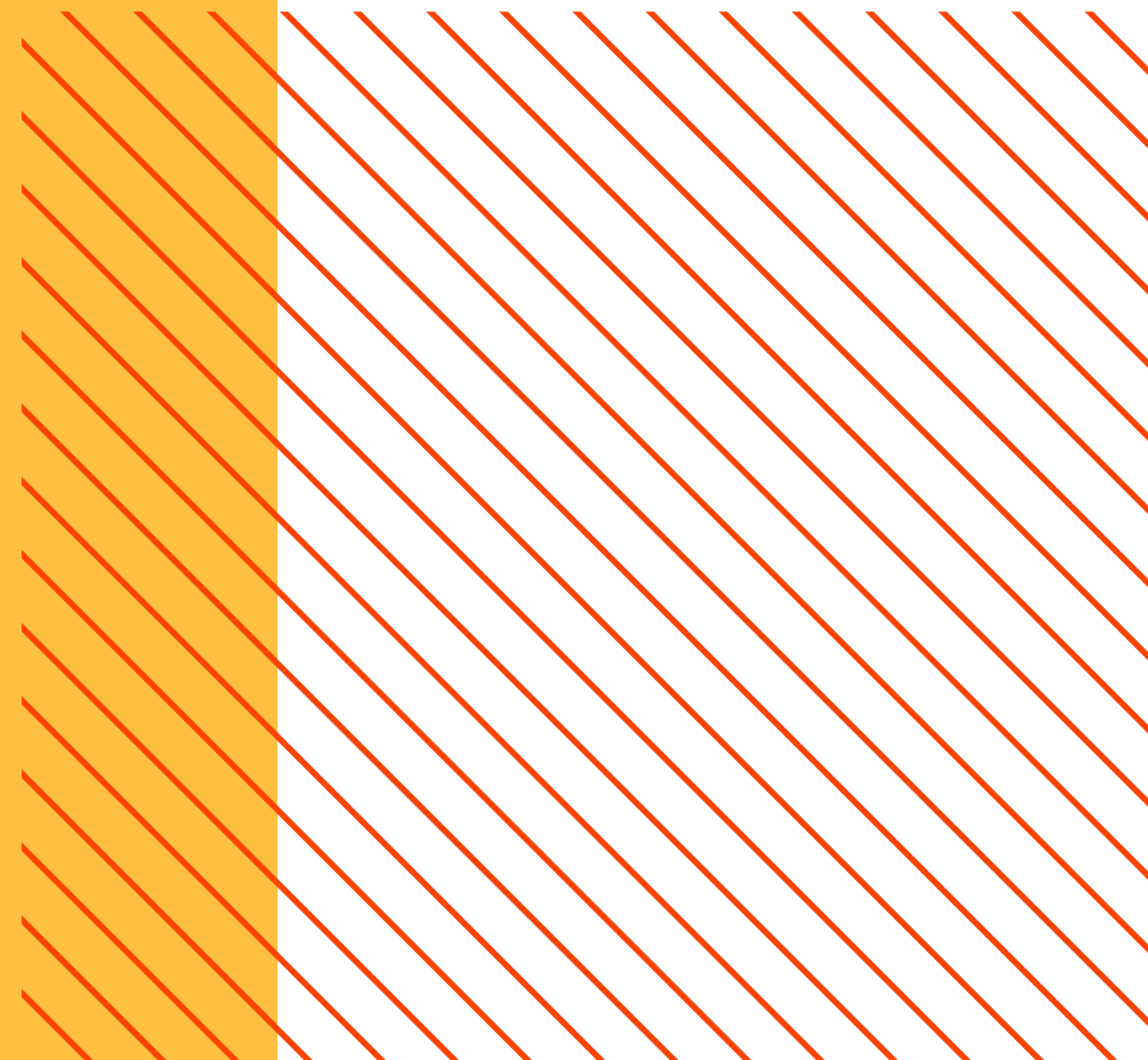
Dean, humanities

We have seen students becoming very focused on learning to assessment over the last ten years or so – our modular structure had also resulted in an increase in the amount of summative assessment we required, squeezing out more formative development stages, and we needed to change this. We want our teaching and our assessment to support our students to think more deeply and critically, both within and across their programme, and to develop the qualities and capacities that will help their career readiness and lifelong success. Our assessments need to develop for an AI-mediated world, but in a way that positively recognises the experiential stages of learning, and re-articulates the value of creative thinking, critical analysis and evaluative judgement.”

Deborah Longworth, pro vice chancellor for education, University of Birmingham

How does change happen?

Change comes from conversations
Building an environment that supports change
The human side of leading change
Impacts of curriculum change



Change comes from conversations

We're seeing a shift from individual professional development to collective community and team-level interventions to create large-scale change beyond a "coalition of the willing." One-to-one coffees in which leaders listen to the concerns and priorities of faculty leaders can be a vital precursor to taking forward more structured change initiatives. Close collaboration across academic and professional teams are also essential.

TEAM WORKSHOPS AND EVENTS

Facilitated sessions that create space for programme teams to reflect, plan, and negotiate curriculum within defined boundaries. Larger scale festival-style events or conferences create opportunities to celebrate and share practice.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Development – at programme, department, and faculty or school level – is essential to seeing real change. This includes empowering team leadership and project management skills as well as disciplinary/pedagogical leadership.

CONSULTANCY WITH LOCAL OWNERSHIP

Central teaching and learning units may adopt a consultancy model to help disciplinary teams plan, implement, and evaluate their ideas – but ownership of the change rests with the discipline.

"Probably we didn't have the leaders when we started, so we had to put work into leadership ...our focus was on bringing people together and creating shared vision, as well as good project management. This has taken a huge amount of resource in management and development. ..The resource you can't throw money at - creating time, leadership - needs to be appreciated."

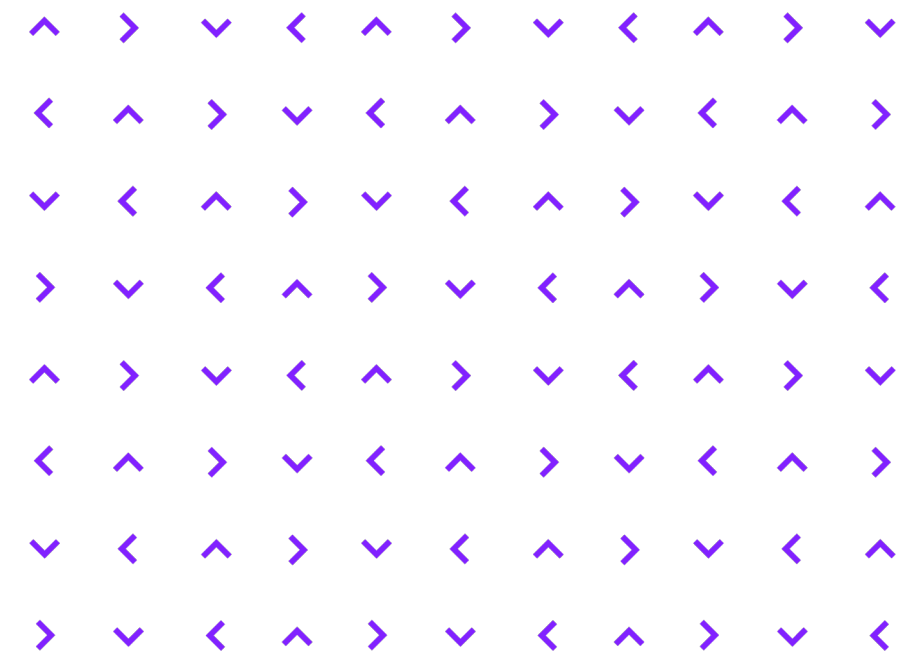
Elizabeth McCrum, University of Reading

"It's better for a team to take a tiny step forward than for an individual to take 20 steps forward, which is why we need lots of people in a room."

Tansy Jessop, University of Bristol

"I'm keen that we get our community talking and I want to make sure that grassroots initiatives end up having impact across the institution. Also we're happy to take risks - not everything works out; in innovative space there has to be room to experiment."

Peter Haynes, Imperial College London





Building an environment that supports change

Curriculum change may go hand in hand with structural changes to the academic calendar, efforts to harmonise credit-bearing activity, new assessment policies, changes to estates, digital transformation, or other internal agendas. Where this is the case structural change can help to drive curriculum change as long as the different change agendas are aligned and complementary.

Resourcing change is needed to give staff the space to do the work required – examples we saw included buying out staff time; offering enhancement funds; or bringing in additional disciplinary or pedagogic expertise.

Work has been done on collecting and assessing the evidence, including hearing from a range of stakeholders; surveying the literature; and building (practical) theories and narratives about learning and teaching that explain the change and make it credible.

Co-production with students is widespread - bringing students in from the beginning and giving them real power to affect the outcome is essential.

Universities that have not traditionally seen teaching as a pathway to promotion are now building recognition and reward systems for leadership of learning, teaching, and curriculum.

Change agendas are flexible – allowing for specific focus or scale depending on disciplinary priorities - and staff are supported with resources, toolkits, and advice throughout.

“The only wrong answer to Curriculum Redefined is no. People are on their own Curriculum Redefined journey and therefore many ways to say yes; the work of some schools is more substantial than others and that’s OK. Work to change how we educate on the part of academics takes a great deal of courage because they need to be vulnerable - it is identity work and we recognise that and we want to support people through that process.”

Jeff Grabill, University of Leeds

“Another piece of the cultural jigsaw is about institutional valuing of curriculum and teaching leadership - colleagues who have come through to professorial level have important leadership roles, recognising and rewarding them for that - [it’s about] understanding that pedagogy and scholarship of pedagogy are essential components of a research-intensive university. That you are valuing it and recruiting staff who have that expertise.”

Sarah Speight, University of Nottingham

“The sector is really quite wedded to the knowledge in/knowledge out model - experiential learning is still quite underdeveloped - we know it’s good but we can’t articulate it, we don’t have the tools or the language... We could draw more on research based on social modes of learning, communities of practice, experiential learning - we need to get better at drawing on those, not deep technical stuff but tools that are useful.”

Deborah Gill, University of Southampton



The human side of leading change

Lots of small innovations can create greater impact than one big bang example – staff need to know that small change is not just acceptable, but worthy of celebration.

Regulatory and internal process requirements can leave university staff feeling powerless. Rather than interpreting anxiety about barriers as resistance to change, focus on getting the structures right to create space for change.

Change inevitably comes with anxiety about implications for individuals. Understanding where people are coming from and why they might feel this way can help to identify what may reassure them.

Leading change at this scale can be exhausting at times and takes great courage and resilience from leaders, especially when part-way through the process. Leaders told us how they build teams around them that can support both the change process and each other – and were keen to share credit for the impacts the institution had seen.

“There are two kinds of innovation - the moonshot and the roofshot. Little innovations are OK, and small can also be transformative. Reporting structures are geared to big stories but we need to be alert to valuing the small changes that go down well and avoid ‘marquee stories’ that aren’t always within everyone’s remit to replicate.”

Danielle Thibodeau, innovation and learning manager, Queen Mary University of London

“Personally I’m never entirely convinced by badging something as a ‘change project’ - it can send people running in the opposite direction. We have quite a lot of change going on but I try to think about it as staged development and evolution. People used to complain that university bureaucracy wouldn’t allow us to be agile. Now we focus on getting the structures and platforms in place to enable cross-college teaching and programme design – it is not so much about overcoming attitudes, which are generally positive towards innovation, as removing barriers.”

Deborah Longworth, University of Birmingham

“It’s less about disciplines and more about individuals. It’s about where the balance of power lies in a department. It’s not necessarily the people who are further along in their careers who are resistant to change. Sometimes it is the other way around. One of the challenges is workload. People are worried that if they are seen to do something differently, then it’s like, “well, you’re not teaching as many lecture courses,” that something will rush in and fill the gap, or their jobs will be taken away.”

Dean, humanities



Impacts of curriculum change – outcomes and change capacity

Impact can be measured in project deliverables (eg volume of programmes updated) – and it helps to have defined these at the start to be able to demonstrate success in the change project’s own terms.

It can also be measured in strategic outcomes such as the “B3” student outcomes of retention, progression, and employability – but these take a long time to manifest in the data, are subject to external change factors, and probably cannot be relied upon as a sole evidence of impact.

We heard that one important outcome of large-scale change is an enhanced institutional capacity for change in the positive sense of being prepared to keep innovating and developing, rather than being at the mercy of external pressures.

This manifests both in the systems and structures that support change and the culture of the institution – the collaborations and conversations that are happening, the skills and capabilities individuals and teams have throughout the institution to do things differently, and the default cultural perception about the possibility and value of change.

“One thing that is ubiquitous across the sector is that challenges move faster than lags in metrics will allow senior management to be comfortable with. Everyone’s under pressure but you can’t change student experience overnight. When changing programmes you’ll see outcomes probably five or six years later. Often when you’re trying to do this it’s the lack of tangible impact that’s a derailing factor.”

Graham Wynn, Northumbria University

“When we started on this journey there wasn’t a sense of continuous change - people said we hadn’t looked at the curriculum since they’d done their undergraduate degree here thirty years before. Now we’re embedding a regular process of review into business as usual we’ve seen people shift from the sense that this is a new PVC moving deck chairs around to the idea that no, we’ll need to be constantly reviewing portfolio, constantly updating.”

Elizabeth McCrum, University of Reading

Thank you

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