Title: The competing pressures of curriculum design in Higher Education: Institutional frameworks, disciplinary contexts, and the student experience

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Explore the competing pressures of curriculum design.
- Examine the relationship between curriculum design and metrics.
- Evaluate the place of the student in curriculum design.

Session Outline

Success in university metrics (such as the NSS, DLHE, LEO, TEF and REF) are an increasing focus of the day-to-day activities of academic life. Higher league table positions, the ability to attract high-performing students, increased international visibility, and the power to charge higher fees are just some of the benefits that accrue with doing well in these metrics. Given the importance placed on metrics and evaluation, it can be easy to lose sight of the key role curriculum design plays in a successful student experience. What they are taught and how they learn shapes a student's sense of their discipline and their place within it (cf. Shawer 2017). Yet an undergraduate curriculum can no longer simply reflect the core tenets of the subject as established in the QAA Benchmark statement. Instead, it must also speak to aspects such as employability, internationalisation, interdisciplinarity and collaboration, skills cited in many lists of graduate attributes and which, ultimately, will contribute to graduate success. Curriculum design is often, then, seen as a contested site where the demands of the wider HE landscape and institutional aspirations battle against the traditions of a given discipline. The challenge for academic teams is to acknowledge these factors and meaningfully translate them into the fabric of the curriculum.

This presentation evaluates the redesign of the undergraduate curriculum for BA English at Birmingham City University (currently one full year of the curriculum is implemented, with the 2nd year curriculum beginning in September 2018) and examines the interplay of external and institutional expectations with those of the subject. It reflects on core aspects such as stakeholder engagement, transition arrangements, learning outcome and assessment design, cohort identity, technology-enhanced learning, student progression, retention and attainment, and employability. While these factors, and the metrics by which they are measured, are important, we ultimately suggest that success in student engagement and experience is based upon the integrity of curriculum design.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

0-10 minutes

In the first part of the presentation, we set out the scene within which the School's curriculum redesign is set, focusing on three elements: 1) institutional guidance and the pillars of internationalisation, employability, interdisciplinarity, practice-based/knowledge-applied, and pursuing excellence; 2) changes in the wider HE landscape, including A-level structure, introduction of TEF, increase in university fees, more focus on student mental health, NSS, employability, and greater enforcement of consumer legislation; 3) the embedding of subject-specific knowledge and skills.

10-15 minutes

In the first discussion section of the presentation, we ask delegates to consider the following questions:

- How should academics respond to the competing (and changing) demands set out by different educational stakeholders?
- What balance should be sought between external, institutional and subject-specific expectations?
- What are likely to be the future trends in curriculum development and how can the sector best prepare itself?

15-25 minutes

In the second part of the presentation, we discuss how we translated the competing pressures set out in part 1 into a curriculum that was meaningful to us and our students. In particular, we reflect on the process of stakeholder involvement and how we identified areas of concern from the outgoing programme, the benefits of institutional training sessions, the integration of QAA benchmarks, the redesign of assessments, and how we approached interdisciplinary collaborative opportunities. We also consider transition arrangements to the BA programme and how we encourage students to reflect on the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their degree and beyond, as well as the systems we now have in place to help students articulate these skills to prospective employers.

25-30 minutes

In the second discussion section of the presentation, we ask delegates to consider the following questions:

- How can we organically embed skill development in the curriculum?
- How can academic staff involved in curriculum design be supported at an institutional and disciplinary level?
- How (and when) do we evaluate programme effectiveness and which measures do we focus on?

30-35 minutes

In the final part of the presentation, we briefly consider the lessons we've learned in the context of curriculum redesign and discuss some of the methods of curriculum review and evaluation that we have established within the School.

35-45 minutes

In the third discussion section of the presentation, we provide delegates with the opportunity to reflect on the content of the presentation, in addition to taking questions and any suggestions for future directions.

References

Shawer, S.F., 2017. Teacher-driven curriculum development at the classroom level: Implications for curriculum, pedagogy and teacher training. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *63*, pp.296-313.