Curriculum-as-vehicle: a journey explored

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Abstract

This paper presents an account of curriculum development and change which is set in an institutional, national and international context. Parallels and divergences in principles and practices relating to curriculum development will be highlighted. Discussion is supported by both Scottish and international perspectives drawn from responses to the QAA Enhancement Theme activities, and from local and international responses to one of the Enhancement Theme Discussion Paper (Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012). Analysis and synthesis of the responses to the Discussion Paper and those gathered though Enhancement Theme activities were used to draw conclusions about the extent to which factors affect curriculum internationally and in a Scottish context.

The paper explores how a theoretical model was used as an organising principle in an institutional context to shape the development of curriculum. Given the range of influences that are brought to bear on the development of the curriculum, the concept of 'curriculum-as-vehicle' (Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012) is utilised to recognize the possibility of over-burdening the curriculum with competing priorities. An institutional context is used to identify the interplay between internal agendas and external influences at the interface with the student experience. Three institutional case studies are used to illustrate different aspects of curriculum change, which takes the discussion beyond traditional conceptions of curriculum as product (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006), presenting employer involvement, student engagement and student support as key institutional and curricular considerations.

Introduction

The QAA's current Enhancement Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (DSC) has provided opportunities for Scottish HEIs to identify, review, and compare curriculum developments not only in Scottish universities but also in the rest of the world. There is debate in the media and in the literature about influences upon curriculum developments as well as discussion about factors that should influence our curricular offerings to students in years to come. This paper presents an account of institutional curriculum development and change which is reviewed in light of conceptual tools developed in a QAA commissioned discussion paper, *Developing and supporting the curriculum: Directions, decisions and debate* (Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012), of international developments in curriculum, and of relevant literature.

Phase 1 of the Enhancement Theme

In phase 1 of the Enhancement Theme (March 2011-June 2012) the sector began to explore amongst regional academic communities key questions about how the student body is changing, how curriculum is shaped and delivered, and what development may be required to support staff in developing curricula which will meet our ambitions for students in higher education in the 21st century. A synopsis of the deliberations around those key questions (Gunn, 2012) indicates that although the higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves vary widely in history, mission and objective, these events enabled the identification of important key themes relating to curriculum development. The Enhancement Theme itself provided a warrant to address these themes in local institutions. The degree of consensus found amongst the HEI community ensured that the local institutional teams could be reasonably confident that their plans and local initiatives could be usefully shared with others in the sector, the DSC theme serving as a real catalyst for action.

Discussion of the impact of the changing characteristics of future students on the curriculum soon indicated that students' previous educational experience, their learning support needs, their differential degrees of digital literacy, their preferred modes of study and their geographical locations during study are some of the most important features likely to have significant impact not only upon present and future curriculum developments but also upon the development and support required for staff. In Mayes' (2012) synthesis of institutional activity across the HE sector, he identifies 'the changing student' as one of the four key strands of current institutional activity, suggesting that these strands should be examined "in finer grain". We shared Mayes' interest in these themes and, firstly, we focussed on the extent to which our local perception of the changing student characteristics and the ways in which curriculum should be shaped and supported represented a distinctly Scottish conception of curriculum; secondly, we considered the extent to which international colleagues had different views and priorities from which we could learn and which we could apply to our own institutional activities and plans.

International context

In January 2013, Edinburgh Napier University hosted a workshop at the 11th Hawaiian International Conference on Education, which was attended by 18 delegates from Australia, Canada, Korea, USA and England. Apart from one school teacher and one PhD student, all the delegates were in academic or professional support roles in Higher Education in a broad range of disciplines. We used similar activities and repurposed resources from the East of Scotland DSC Regional Road Show in order to generate comparable data between this workshop for an international audience and our own Scottish regional events held in 2012. The overall aims of both the Scottish and the international workshop were to gather views about the characteristics of the changing student body in delegates' national and institutional contexts and to learn from their ideas about the development required for staff to support and deliver new models of curriculum. All of the delegates anticipated far greater student diversity than ever before, and, while there were very many similarities in the characteristics identified by colleagues in Hawaii and in Edinburgh, we noted some interesting differences. Distinctive amongst the international delegates was the need for relevant curricular provision and support for students studying in remote geographical locations and for students with established mental health conditions, and opportunities for language development amongst non-native English speakers and for language acquisition (such as Mandarin). Nevertheless, while the characteristics of the changing student body may vary according to discipline and to a certain extent to nationality, we conclude that the outcomes from each of the workshops in Hawaii and in Edinburgh were broadly similar, in particular government led educational reforms and the importance of working in partnership with employers.

Our conception of the curriculum as vehicle, in which the curriculum is recognized as being the pivotal point between local and national agendas and the students whom these policies are designed to serve, was offered in the discussion paper commissioned by the QAA as a way of conceptualising curriculum (Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012). We found this was a useful portrayal of curriculum which we could share during the early days of our institutional team's work (Figure 1: Curriculum as vehicle). Our experience with colleagues in Hawaii suggests that the curricular vehicle as we portrayed it and the load it carries is not a uniquely Scottish one but one which may be recognized by an international audience.

Karset and Siveskin (2010) discuss the extent to which there is "public legitimacy for the cultivation of national cultures" as part of the overall purpose of curriculum and, correspondingly, 'national culture' was identified by several international colleagues as one item which was missing from our institutional agendas and priorities shown in the diagram below. Certainly it seems that the term 'national culture' is not an item with clear defining characteristics given priority in curriculum developments in Scotland at present. Indeed,

there is a question to be framed around what is meant by national culture and how that may impact on education in its broadest sense.

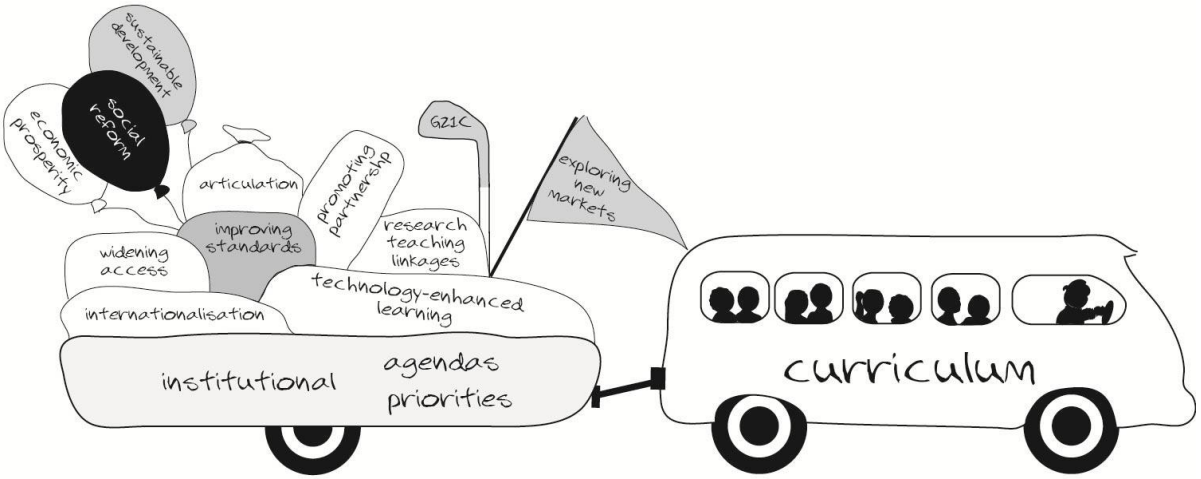

Figure 1: Curriculum as vehicle (From Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012)

Factors affecting curriculum

As the Theme's work has developed, and as we have become more interested in analysing the factors affecting curriculum at a more fine grained level, we find that we agree with Mayes (2012) that conceptually the 'curriculum as vehicle' metaphor may be "too broad to be useful" in this regard; however, it provides a useful tool for dialogue. A related view of curriculum is offered by Barnett (2009), who also suggests a vehicle as a metaphor for students' development, but one which is built around subject knowledge. Barnett's portrayal enables a distinction to be made amongst knowing (discipline knowledge), a student's development, and the role of the curricula and pedagogies in nurturing the development of the student's qualities and dispositions. This conception of curriculum emphasises that discipline knowledge is only one element of the university experience that influences how well students are prepared for their future lives and careers. Discussions about how best to describe curriculum remain important, and we have found that developing our own conceptions and referring to other analytical frameworks has opened up new possibilities for discussion amongst our institutional team and has allowed us to see aspects of curriculum development and support in a new light. In Rorty's first essay on the contingency of language (cited in Allan, J 2003, p20), he refers to the use of metaphor as a recontextualisation "where metaphorical *redescription* provides a jolt to the imagination" (cited in Allan, J 2003, p20). We have certainly found this to be the case.

Through both the national and international workshops, it is clear that higher educational professionals recognize the danger of overburdening the curriculum with competing global, national and institutional priorities, and of potentially marginalising disciplinary priorities and subject based criteria. Further, the discussions indicated that these priorities, and the complex interactions between them, have been the subject of debate internationally, and this is certainly the case within our own institution. Figure 2 (*Factors affecting curriculum*, from Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012) provides a representation of the factors affecting curriculum and their impact upon the student who is typically seen as being at the heart of the curriculum. The diagram, with its irregular concentric circles, attempts to illustrate the differential impact of the seven external factors upon the institution, on the professional discipline and on the academic subject. The student's (changing) knowledge, skills and expectations exert pressure from the centre, impacting also upon the shape of the curriculum. We agree with Barnett's observation (Barnett, 2000) that an analysis of curricula needs to be set within a social and global context, but even that may not sufficiently portray

the complexity of the social processes at work within the different disciplines. He concludes that there is no definite pattern to changes taking place in curricula. In pulling together the outcomes of both the Scottish and international workshops where some of these complex social processes were discussed, we have observed that, whilst it may not be a 'pattern' as defined by Barnett (2000), there is consistency of movement in the development of various aspects of curriculum. An example of this includes the alignment of curricula with national standards in Scotland, Australia, Canada and the USA amongst others.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs , 2009) is summarised in its two goals: firstly for Australian schooling to promote excellence and equity, and secondly for all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. In April 2008, the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (CMEC) announced the release of *Learn Canada 2020*, which they described as “a new vision to address the education needs and aspirations of Canadians” (CMEC, 2008). The *Learn Canada 2020* framework addresses every aspect of lifelong learning, but the vision for elementary to high school systems is focussed on high national standards which will deliver “world-class skills in literacy, numeracy, and science”. In the USA in 2009, President Barack Obama announced the launch of *Race to the Top* which was intended to advance reforms initiated under The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001. The reforms attempt to ensure proficiency in language, arts and mathematics by the introduction of “adequate yearly progress” tests for all schools which are measured against “common core standards” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). The *Help Your Child* series of publications associated with the new curriculum encourages parents to help their children to become, “strong readers, good students and responsible citizens” (US Department of Education, 2003) and are typical of the “proselytizing rhetoric”, which Priestly (2010, p26) observes accompanies recent educational reform. In Scotland in 2010, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) which is for young people between the ages of 3 to 18 was introduced into schools with its overarching aim being,”to enable all children to develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society” (Scottish Executive, 2004). Like each of the other national reforms described above, the ambitions for CfE are to be achieved by schools working to a national qualifications framework, emphasis upon learning outcomes and experiences and a shift from more subject specific to more generic criteria (Priestly, 2010). Whilst the Curriculum for Excellence appears to be a distinctively Scottish factor impacting upon curriculum, internationally, parallels suggest that school curriculum reform is widespread. The alignment of curriculum with nationally agreed high standards in literacy, maths and science plus the establishment of measurable goals are central to these developments, all of which are designed to improve individual educational outcomes.

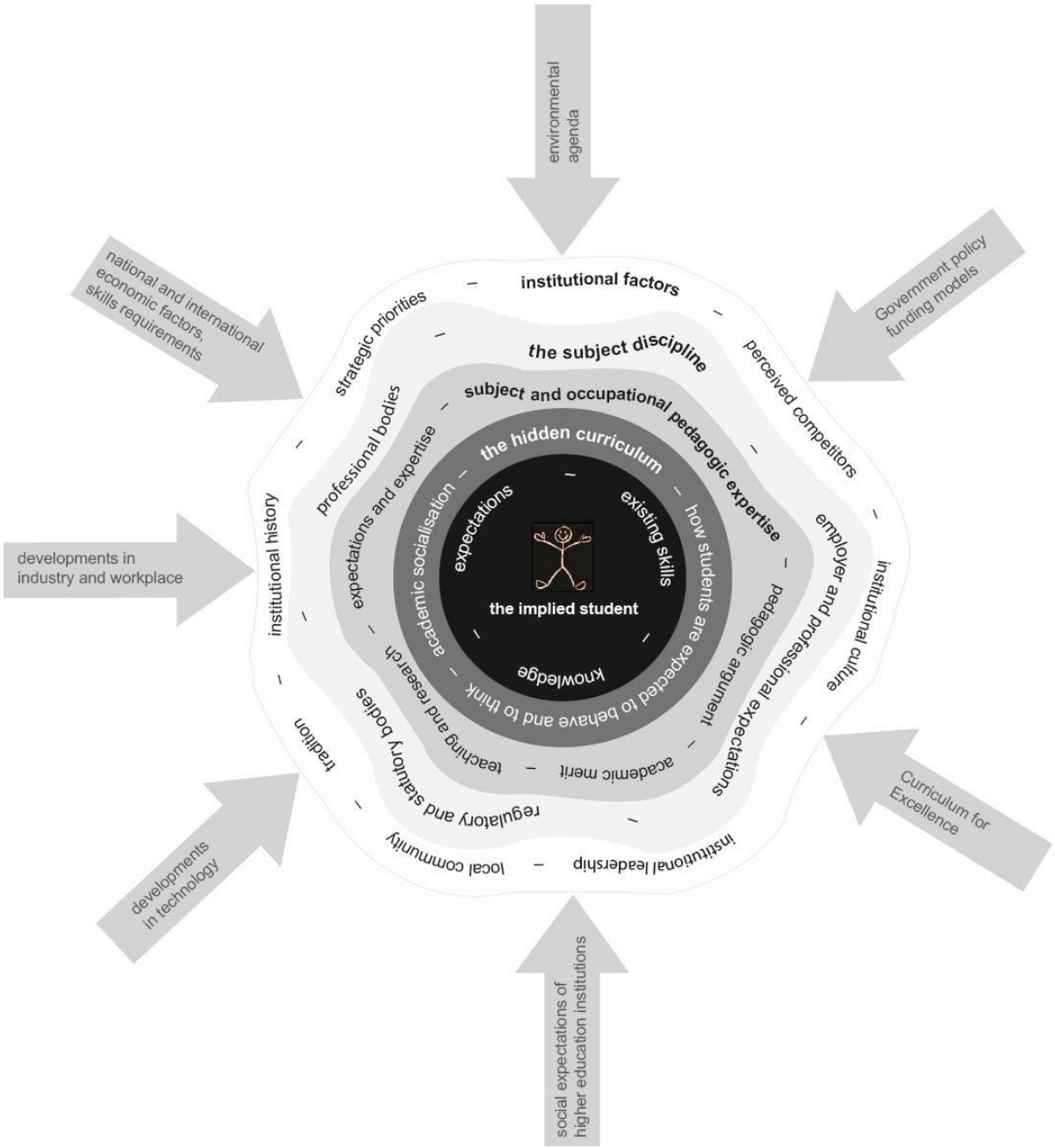

Figure 2: Factors affecting curriculum (from Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012)

Institutional case studies

Institutional case studies have been used as a means to identify the juxtaposition of internal agendas and external influences at the interface with the student experience. An examination of the three case studies presented here together with other institutional activities that we have undertaken during the course of phase 1 and 2 of this Enhancement Theme have led us to recognize that the external pressures have weighed very heavily on curriculum development and change, indeed far more so than we had initially thought to be the case.

In 2011/12, we carried out the Academic Portfolio Review (Edinburgh Napier University, 2012a) which was submitted as a case study for phase 1 of the Theme's activities. The

Review examined the 'health' of our present portfolio of academic programmes, but it also opened important conversations with staff, employers and students about ways in which our future academic portfolio would be capable of meeting the future needs of students, employers, the economy, and society. The external environment, (represented by each of the block arrows in Figure 2), was discussed at a series of consultative events at which representative stakeholders were able to start to plan how the curriculum might be reconfigured to respond to these external pressures. At the same time as these high level discussions were taking place, our second case study known as *Curriculum Design using Technology Enhanced Learning for the BA (Hons) Youth Work Programme* (Edinburgh Napier University, 2012b) was taking shape. We understood this to be a response to a number of the external factors shown in Figure 2, including *developments in industry and workplace*, *social expectations of higher education* and *developments in technology*.

A blended learning work-based degree in Youth Work was developed and delivered in partnership between Edinburgh Napier University supported by City of Edinburgh Council. The degree was delivered almost exclusively online with the support of online materials, synchronous tutorials and workplace supervisors. We presented this as an example of curriculum design which took account not only of external factors impacting on curriculum, but also of the changing student characteristics that had typified our discussions both in Scotland and with an international audience in respect of the need for flexible, online work based programmes. Despite universally positive feedback from students, from the City of Edinburgh Council, the accreditation of the programme by the Community Learning and Development Standards Councils, and despite its commended innovative curriculum design and mode of delivery, the programme has failed to recruit sufficient students for the year ahead. Although this is a tremendously disappointing outcome the lessons learned from this innovation and the development of practice amongst our own academics and our partners has provided invaluable experience. It reminds us that although models and frameworks can help us to shape thinking and discussion about curriculum development, they do not represent theories of curriculum demand nor any kind of forecasting mechanism. Parker (2003) explores the adverse consequences of 'employment-based curriculum' in terms of its inhibiting effect on higher education. Using Barnett's distinction between traditional and emerging curricula (Barnett et al, 2001), Parker suggests that the emerging curriculum suppresses the subject as the primary focus. This forces a 'commodified' curriculum which in turn commodifies the student into one seeking a 'knowledge-skill-work packet' (Parker, 2003 p534) required for progression in the world of work. She laments the paucity of any hard data which supports the view that undergraduate students want such a 'commodified' curriculum. Our experience with the BA Youth Work suggests that while we should be cautious in anticipating student demand for innovative delivery models and modes of study in untried areas of curriculum, we should not overlook the enthusiasm of the first cohort of students for they way in which the programme allowed them to meet their need to combine paid employment and caring responsibilities with degree level study. We remain optimistic for this type of curriculum development and look forward to further research which may show whether or not this optimism to have been well-founded.

Figure 2 illustrates how various external factors exert pressure on the internal institutional environment .We can also see from the Enhancement Theme case study repository (http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resources/case-studies) that practice is already underway in several universities in the development and support of curriculum structures that are intended to more adaptable to the changing internal and external environment portrayed in the diagram. Mayes (2012) identifies six key aspects of curriculum flexibility[1] and we present our E-Placement Scotland case study as an example of a development

[1] Flexible curriculum structures, flexible delivery methods, flexible forms of assessment, personalisation (flexibility for the individual learner) , flexible learning methods, flexible curriculum boundaries (Mayes 2013)

which aligns well with our model of factors affecting curriculum and with several aspects of curriculum flexibility. E-placement Scotland, funded by Scottish Funding Council and with support from partners[2], is designed to create opportunities for computing students to obtain paid work placements across Scotland. Edinburgh Napier University has created a matching service which helps students to connect with available work roles which match their skills, career aspirations and availability.

The flexibility of these placements is of particular interest to our discussion in this paper because they can allow *all* computing students to access work placements, including those who might otherwise have been excluded from more traditional student placement structures because of disability, part time working arrangements or caring responsibilities. These placements, which can be for short or long term, are valued highly by staff in the School of Computing, by participating employers and by the students themselves because of their potential to enhance graduate employability, to develop skills which can inform course work and classroom interaction and to promote engagement and networking opportunities with the profession prior to graduation (Edinburgh Napier University, 2013). These placements are undoubtedly sound educationally and highly valued, but they too indicate the drive from external factors on the institutional development of curriculum. The value which our students have placed on their placement experience is consistent with an Australian study in Griffith University (Crebert et al., 2004) where as part of a wider investigation into generic skills (Griffith Graduate Project), Crebert and colleagues attempted to determine the perceptions of employers and students of the potential for work placements to develop generic skills, abilities and capacities. Their findings supported the inclusion of work placements for undergraduates and highlighted the potential value of involving employers in other aspects of curriculum design and even assessment. We do not share Parker's (2003) disdain for 'emerging curriculum' as our experience of E-placement Scotland indicates that it is be possible to work through the concentric circles in Figure 2 with disciplinary rigour.

Conclusion

At the outset of this Theme, we had assumed that student and discipline-led factors which feature heavily in our institutional commitments and communications to students would be the predominating influences on curriculum. However by applying the case studies and information from international accounts of curriculum development, it seems that external factors such as government-led educational reforms and funding packages which reflect both governmental and workplace priorities exert much more influence than we had previously accorded to them. We had held the belief that educational and student-based variables were paramount in driving curriculum. We have come to the conclusion that the external influences exert pressure not solely on curriculum development but also become part of the process of the curriculum *and* of the curriculum product itself. It is not surprising that curriculum development relies on the professional judgement of academics (Priestly, 2010) and on the active engagement of students, but our analysis of case studies has emphasised the importance of the involvement of employers and of the values, beliefs and expectations of the agencies which are associated with each ring of the concentric circles seen in Figure 2. It is also clear that although Figure 2 had offered each of the concentric circles as a discrete element of influence on the delivery of curriculum, this does not adequately represent the reality of how educational experiences for students are shaped and realised. On reflection, it seems that there is a permeability between these concentric circles which results in the dynamic nature of much of the curriculum development encountered in institutions.

The DSC Enhancement Theme has enabled the development of a diverse publicly available institutional database of practice, comprising programmes of work and case studies. On the basis of the analysis carried out as part of this paper and using the database, there is

[2] Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum, Scotland IS and E-skills UK.

potential to refine Figure 2 to take into account the permeability of the membranes between the concentric circles which would result in a much more dynamic and less compartmentalised portrayal of the factors affecting curriculum. Such a model has potential value as a mechanism for framing institutional discussions which explicitly acknowledge the drivers for change in curriculum.

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