

CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION – AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Chương trình giáo dục Đại học – trên bình diện quốc tế

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum, broadly defined, is an underutilized construct in higher education. This paper discusses the nature of curriculum. Issues relating to purpose, structure, design, access, technology, choice, competition, communication and balance are briefly considered drawing on a range of international examples. A comprehensive consideration of curriculum offers a coherent way to bring together the many issues related to the learning opportunities that higher education institutions offer their students.

Keywords: *curriculum, global higher education, international issues*

TÓM TẮT

Chương trình được hiểu một cách rộng rãi là một cấu trúc chưa hoàn chỉnh ở giáo dục Đại học. Bài viết này nghiên cứu về bản chất của chương trình. Các yếu tố liên quan đến mục đích, cấu trúc, thiết kế, truy cập, công nghệ, sự lựa chọn, sự cạnh tranh, giao tiếp và sự cân bằng được xem xét một cách căn bản qua các minh chứng mang tính quốc tế. Một sự xem xét toàn diện về chương trình sẽ mang lại một sự liên kết để cùng mang lại các yếu tố về cơ hội học tập điều mà các cơ sở đào tạo Đại học mang đến cho sinh viên.

Từ khóa: *chương trình; giáo dục Đại học toàn cầu; các yếu tố quốc tế*

Introduction

Over the past 10 years ‘curriculum in higher education’ has received considerably more attention at an institutional level than in previous decades. Through the latter half of the twentieth century little attention was given to curriculum in Western academic literature (Hicks, 2007), though the concept has great potential for bringing all aspects of teaching and learning together into a coherent well articulated offering to students. What writing did exist was largely confined to a focus on ‘curriculum design’ or on ‘curriculum issues’, such as ‘internationalizing the curriculum’ and ‘inclusive curriculum’, with

an assumed understanding of what is actually meant by curriculum.

Now much more attention is being given to the concept of curriculum right across the sector internationally. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a keynote address to an international conference was held on the Quality of Higher Education Curriculum” and educational institutions there have significant numbers of PhD students studying in the area. In Australia almost all higher education institutions have undergone some form of institution wide curriculum review over the past ten years. Much of this attention is an effort to market to students and their families what a particular institution has to offer in

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competition with other providers. Or alternatively it is aimed at meeting the requirements of external government bodies demanding levels of quality in educational offerings (these being linked to the licensing and funding of institutions). Internationally, the development of MOOCs, massive on-line open courses, has also challenged institutions to reconsider what they are offering. However, there still remains a limited and partial use of the concept of curriculum when interpreted and applied broadly.

There are somewhere between 9,000 and maybe as many as 23,000 higher education institutions in the world today (Universities Worldwide, 2013 and Ranking web of Universities, 2013). These figures are indicative only. The range is great because such institutions are difficult to identify across the globe and definitional issues begin to confuse the issue. But, the sector is much bigger than affluent publically-profiled institutions in the West believe. While approximately 400 to 500 institutions are regularly ranked in 'worlds best' tables (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2014 and Academic Rankings of World Universities, 2014), this comprises less than 5% of the total number of institutions. While the sector appears to be growing, little of this growth is occurring in elite research-intensive institutions. Rather the greatest growth is occurring through the establishment of new institutions where labour market, population profile, and aspirations of emerging, marginally more affluent, communities demand it. This growth is occurring in countries such as China, India and Vietnam. The demographics of higher education look quite different in countries like the US, the UK and Australia. Considering the sector in its

entirety considerably different approaches to curriculum can be detected.

Across the world the impact of new technology on our ability to communicate and to access information is immeasurable and appears highly likely to have a continuing and increasing influence. The ability for institutions to engage across national boundaries appears greater than it ever has been. For some institutions at least, local and global competition for students, and the income they bring, is becoming more and more intense.

In this broad global context, how should we view curriculum and what are the critical issues for curriculum in higher education?

The nature of curriculum

The broader education literature, most of it related to the school sector, shows the term 'curriculum' as complex and allowing many definitions and interpretations (Lovat and Smith, 2003). Its history in higher education can be traced to 1633 when Scottish universities were using the term in its Latin form (Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1), 2007). Wikipedia cites 'The Curriculum' (Bobbitt, 1918) as the first textbook on curriculum. In his book Bobbitt defined 'the curriculum as an ideal, rather than as the concrete reality, of the deeds and experiences that form people to who and what they are' (Curriculum, 2014). This is consistent with the notions of curriculum as 'being and becoming', developed much more recently by Barnett and Coate (2005).

While contemporary views of curriculum often limit the term to 'a course of study at a school or college' or 'a list of all the courses of study offered by a school of college' (dictionary.com, 2014), a broader definition has much more utility. It has the

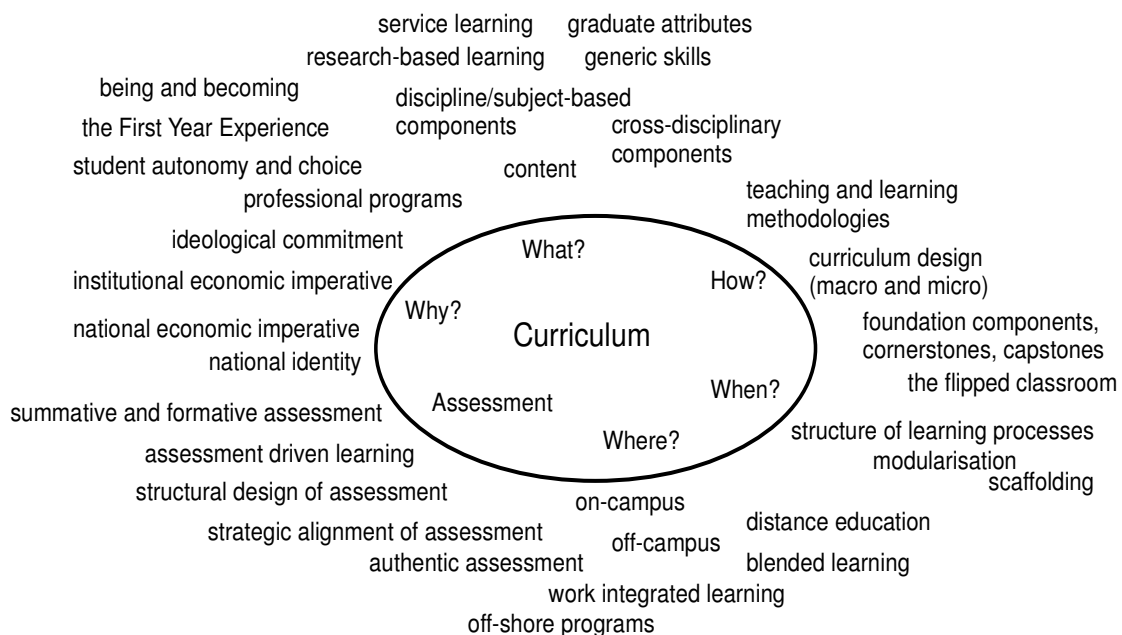
potential to bring together discipline-focused interests in content, as well as learning and teaching methodologies. It has the potential to locate in a comprehensive schema, existing and emerging discipline and cross-discipline courses, ‘prior’ and ‘work-based’ learning, a broad range of design aspects of curriculum, consideration and appropriate utilization of current and emerging information and communications technology, as well as issues of purpose in the provision of higher education.

A broad definition of curriculum in higher education could be put simply as ‘the (intended) student learning experience at university’. The word ‘intended’ is included in parentheses to indicate both the planned nature of curriculum and the potential for actual learning experiences that different from those intended. The definition is focused on *the*

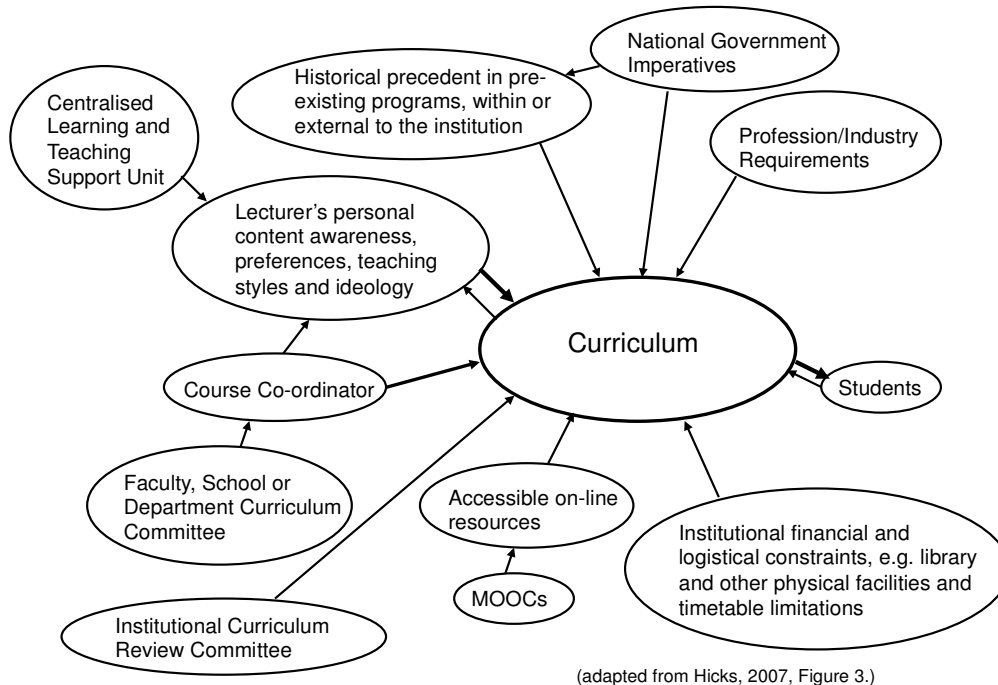
student with a consideration of their entire learning experience. It doesn’t include experiences of a purely social nature.

The following diagram (Figure 1) is intended to reflect the complexity and richness of such a definition, extending earlier work of the UK Higher Education Academy, Imaginative Curriculum Project (2007). That Project viewed curriculum as embracing the what, why, how and when of student learning as well as a consideration of assessment issues. Figure 1 includes a range of related ideas and activities, all relevant to higher education curriculum, clustered around the core considerations of ‘why?’, ‘what?’, ‘how?’, ‘when?’ ‘where?’ and ‘assessment’. It is not the intention of this paper to elaborate on all of these but rather to reflect further on some in the context of a discussion of key curriculum concerns in higher education.

**Figure 1: Curriculum in higher education
– the (intended) student learning experience at university.**



Adapted from Hicks (2007)

Figure 2. Typical Influences on Curriculum

Extension of earlier work of the UK Higher Education Academy, Imaginative Curriculum Project (2007).

Typical Influences on Curriculum in Higher Education

It is useful to map some of the typical influences on curriculum in higher education today. While these are given different emphasis in different countries, most can be identified in higher education in all nations. Figure 2 attempts to highlight at least some of these. The elements identified are not necessarily exhaustive but they do prompt a range of issues for reflection and discussions. The figure attempts to show the continuing importance of the direct human engagement in the curriculum by lecturers, course co-ordinators and students, while also flagging the influence of accessible on-line resources. It notes the engagement of institutional groups such as faculty and institutional curriculum

committees. It recognizes historical precedent in determining many aspects of curriculum, while also noting government, professional and industry influences. Financial and logistical constraints and support services are also indicated as having an impact on the ability of institutions to offer effective student learning experiences.

Curriculum is not static. The situation of curriculum in institutions will vary over time. It will differ across and within national boundaries. It will change with changes in government and government policy, and with changing social and economic demands. It will be modified by the availability of new technological resources and be influenced by changing student expectations.

Key curriculum concerns in higher education

Bastedo (2005) identified curriculum in American higher education as ‘often characterized as a pendulum swinging from one extreme to another, from religion to secular science, from prescribed study of the classics to curricular pluralism, and from tradition and conservatism to experimentation and growth.’ Attempting to identify key concerns across the sector globally at a particular point in time is fraught with difficulty. Some issues may be of universal concerns while others are of significance in just some regions of the world. Some concerns may be critical but just of national or local significance. Other concerns may be general in nature affecting the whole of the sector and all disciplines. Yet others may relate to just a cluster of disciplines, e.g. the social sciences, or even to a single discipline. The context of issues may be institutional, program focused, or related to individual units of the student learning experience. Weighing one as ‘key and another ‘not’ becomes largely a matter of individual judgment. The following formulation of ‘key concerns’ arises from observations and the direct practice experiences of the author as a ‘coal-face’ academic, director of institutional development services, and national and international consultant in higher educational development. They are inevitably idiosyncratic to the author, contestable, and perhaps just an indication of where the pendulum is in its swing.

1. Purpose

‘Fundamentally what should our institutions be providing and producing? Why are we (university academics) here?’ Considerations of these questions are basic to

curriculum in higher education. Unfortunately they are given too little attention in most institutions in most countries around the world. Historically considerable attention was paid to purpose at the time of establishment of a new university, albeit the purpose being prescribed by government or the non-government establishing body. In most nations with a rapidly developing higher education sector government direction of this development is direct and explicit with little institutional autonomy.

In many instances purpose has been quickly defined in terms of courses to be provided to particular cohorts of potential students and the new institution is expected to ‘get about its business’. Underlying purposes are often assumed and long periods elapse before ‘purpose’ is revisited. Little reference back to stated purpose occurs when addressing the detail of particular programs. A possible exception to this can be seen in current attention in the West to ‘generic skills’ and ‘graduate capabilities’ which are often established by going back to basic issues of ‘purpose’.

The economic imperative can be seen as the original purpose of many institutions and some have seen a refocus on issues of graduate employability as a key to attracting students and government favour. This is evidenced in developing countries such as East Timor, where the Dili Institute of Technology mission statement seeks ‘to satisfy the community need for people with knowledge, expertise and skills in science, technology and the professions, appropriate for the national development’ (Dili Institute for Technology, 2014). It can also be seen in the curriculum focus of Swinburne University in Australia where curriculum renewal was given emphasis through a ‘Model for Professional Learning’,

to real world learning experiences to prepare graduates to make the transition to professional practice (Lee, 2011).

Many institutions and the courses they offer have at least a component of furthering the national identity and social fabric of the country in which they are established. This is evident in most institutions in China and Vietnam, where ideology, politics, and national imperatives are explicitly built into programs.

However, there is also a risk of what could be called ‘educational colonialism’ when international boundaries are crossed by courses and course materials. For example publishing houses in the West can have a significant influence on the experience of students where foreign (English) texts are used. This is evident in the teaching of English in Chinese universities where Western norms and values are often indirectly endorsed through foreign or collaboratively written texts. On-line courses available across international boundaries may also conflict with local culture and ideology, potentially weakening the national social fabric. This is of particular concern with the growing availability of MOOCs referred to later in the paper.

In nations with long established universities and liberal political regimes, national ideology may be seen as having no place in university teaching, but moral or ethical teaching may be seen to be lacking in many programs. This has been of concern in a number of business courses in Australia in recent years. More generally the recent focus on ‘service courses’, placing students in voluntary positions in the community, is seen by some as an attempt to bring some moral and ethical component into the curriculum.

From a different perspective, ‘purpose’ has recently been linked to ‘research’ as a component of curriculum. It is argued by some that what makes university learning experiences unique and valuable should be their inclusion of real research activity. An earlier focus on what was often described as the teaching-research nexus is now seen in the introduction of research experiences and an ethos of research in undergraduate curricula. An example of this can be seen at a national level in Ireland, outlined in their National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011). There is now a growing body of literature on this topic.

So, issues of ‘purpose’ should always remain of key concern when considering the curriculum. They are likely to be contentious and cannot be debated and determined purely internally to the institution.

2. Structure and Design

The structure and design of programs for student learning is the area that has received most attention in the literature on curriculum in higher education. This ‘architectural focus’ continues to be important at many levels. As a visible representation of what a university has to offer for students, it can have an important marketing function. The consideration of broad structural aspects of curriculum has received a lot of attention in most Australian universities over the past ten years. A notable result can be seen in ‘The Melbourne Model’ of The University of Melbourne (2006), which ‘involved rethinking the University’s curricula from first principles’ and saw its 96 undergraduate programs replaced with ‘six stand-alone ‘new generation’ undergraduate degrees’. Similarly, at The University of Western Australia, the broad array of degrees was reduced to just five, each comprising

components identified as ‘core’, ‘complementary’ and ‘broadening’. Both models have adopted a more generic undergraduate approach followed by specialization at post-graduate level. Earlier, the Bologna Process in the EU prompted similar broad reshaping of curricula across Europe with a standard 3+2 (bachelors + masters) being promoted in member countries.

Within some institutions renewed attention has also been given to restructuring with respect to broad organizational components such as foundation courses, cornerstone and capstone courses, aimed at giving overall programs broader coherence for students. One of the values of this approach to designing the curriculum is that integration and coherence are emphasized and widespread co-operation across the institution is required to achieve such curricula. Evidence of this approach can be found in Australia’s La Trobe University ‘Design for Learning’ (2009) document.

Modular courses developed in the latter half of the last century, that allowed students significant choice in compiling their degree (most commonly a liberal arts degree) appear to be less popular now. They are being replaced by ‘scaffolded programs’ that structure a progression of learning opportunities for students, with built-in supports to facilitate learning in early years and greater student independence later in programs. ‘Scaffolding’ as a design concept has now become popular at all levels of course design.

Attention to the structure and design of curriculum is really *the* traditional focus when considering curriculum. It remains a key concern because poorly designed courses will always disadvantage learners. Good design is

not necessarily intuitive. It needs to be thought through.

Technological developments, from computer networks to mobile phone social networking have allowed greater flexibility in design, providing further reason for retaining a focus on structure and design in higher education curriculum. While in the past, presentation of information was largely linear, in hard-copy text, new technology has allowed much more use of multiple pathways to information, not just as text but as sound and images. Accordingly, students have the opportunity to store and process information in ways not available with more restrictive technologies. This brings with it great opportunities, and in fact demands, to rethink teaching and learning processes, to re-design existing curricula and to create new models for learning.

3. Access and the technological facilitation of learning

The most dramatic development in higher education curriculum relates to technology. There has been what could be described as ‘an invasion of technology into the curriculum domain’. New technologies, where available, have the potential to change so much. This may not be all positive. There are indications that emerging technologies change curriculum to support what they have to offer, rather than being developed to enhance actual curriculum improvement. It must also be noted that the availability of new technology has acted as a stimulus to rethink various aspects of curriculum that have remained in place through inertia.

Technological advances have meant enormous change to the way knowledge is stored, accessed and transmitted. This has opened up new opportunities for the way in

which curriculum content is presented and subsequently experienced by students. Curriculum designs need to be rethought to make best use of emerging technologies. A less controlled and more random access to information is now available to many students. Linear teacher mediated models of instruction are no longer seen as appropriate in many learning environments. Student to student interaction during the learning process can be greatly facilitated by the use of social media. The need for teachers to be the presenters of information to students in a face-to-face lecture is greatly reduced when students can directly access vast amounts of information via computers and other data-retrieval devices such as tablets and smart phones. However, guiding this access becomes a much more important role for the teacher. The ‘flipped classroom’ construct is a good example of what new technology brings to the learning experience. ‘The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed’ (EDUCAUSE, 2014). It should be noted that in essence the latest communication technology is not essential to this model but such technology certainly facilitates the process.

MOOCs, massive on-line open courses, also present challenges in the context of curriculum development. The ability of institutions to make available across the world reputedly high quality courses (see Mooc-List), free to anyone who has the technology to access them, presents all sort of challenges. Will the packaged MOOC, available electronically, be superior in design, or seen as superior, in comparison to local more contextual courses? Can institutions in countries with limited resources for higher education make effective use of MOOCs?

Could they be incorporated into the curricula of institutions and enhanced through mediation by local staff? What protections need to be put in place to protect national ideological and cultural aspects of curriculum if ‘global packages’ of learning experiences become more accessible?

While cutting edge technology offers much, it should be noted that it is not universally available or affordable. It provides great opportunity in developed, affluent, higher education environments but may prove little more than a frustration in poorly resourced localities with limited infrastructure. Ways need to be found to modify highly technologically dependent curriculum to suit contexts where such technology is out of reach, or where the costs outweigh the benefits.

4. Choice

The tension between prescription and election in the design of university curricula is not new. The earliest universities established ‘prescribed’ or set programs for select cohorts of students intended to become the ruling elite of the nation. Teachers knew best. Students absorbed knowledge and a value system at the direction of the venerated teacher. Evidence of this approach can still be seen in institutions dominated by a Confucian heritage. More recently, and most evident in North America in the 1960s to 80s with the ‘massification’ of the sector, a distinctive shift towards ‘election’ (or choice) occurred. Diversity in students, an explosion in knowledge and its complexity and availability, and a liberalization of social values, saw the provision of greater choice for students in what they wished to study and why. In many Western countries, as noted earlier, modularization became popular, particularly in liberal arts programs, while not

so in professional programs. Further as students became more informed and more demanding, and as they were re-cast as consumers of higher education services, they were more able to select what suited them best, and what they were prepared to pay for. This choice saw an explosion in the number of different subjects students could put together to form an undergraduate degree. It also supported the interests of some academics seeking to promote study in the narrowly defined areas of their particular interest.

Choice remains a critical concern in many contexts. The extent of choice may be limited by teachers and scholars, as custodians of disciplinary or professional knowledge and identity. However, choices may be extended to meet emerging social or community concerns at program level, or within programs. For example, recent environmental concern in many countries has seen the establishment of new curricula dedicated to all aspects of 'saving our planet from environmental decay'. Complete new courses addressing social, scientific and economic aspects of the issue have been developed, in some cases through cross-faculty co-operation, in others through the establishment of new departments or faculties. Where existing courses remain largely intact, specialization in dedicated topics on environmental issues have been included.

At all levels of a curriculum what choices are we prepared to offer our students? What degree of choice should we offer? Where should students be free to choose what, or how to learn? Where should their choices be restricted? These are questions that need ongoing consideration.

In professional programs, such as medicine, law and engineering, national

professional associations have a dominating influence on curriculum, concerned not only with the transfer of an appropriate set of knowledge and skill, but also with the inculcation of the 'correct' professional identity and values.

But choice is not cheap. It invariably adds to the cost of the student experience being offered. How much can we afford? How much should we afford? To what extent does choice enhance or diminish the quality of what is offered? One of the driving forces for curriculum revision in many countries with established higher education systems has been the realization that the perceived demands for more and more choice added little to students' learning experiences and were simply unsustainable in tightening economic conditions. In countries with more government control of the sector the excessive choice that plagued Western institutions has not been permitted to develop.

5. Competition

A dominant current concern in Australian higher education, some would say *the* concern, is institutional economic survival. Universities in Australia have become big business over recent decades attracting more and more of their funding from student fees. Institutions are most anxious to develop and maintain a profile that will attract both local and international students. The Australian higher education sector recognizes competing within the country and abroad for students. Most Australian universities have undertaken reviews and revision of curricula over the past 10 to 15 years. These reviews have attempted to give a competitive edge to respective institutions in attracting students.

In 2014, the Australian Broadcasting Commission reported:

Ranking tables [mentioned in the introduction] are especially important for Australia, where international students bring \$15 billion to the economy, making higher education the country's third largest export earner after iron ore and coal. The sector brings more money to the Australian economy than gas, gold, tourism, oil or wheat.

The Group of Eight, a group of Australia's large research universities, says Australia is the world's third most popular destination for international students, attracting nearly 7 per cent of international student population. Ranking tables help these students decide which university to attend. (ABC Fact Check, 2014)

In attempting to attract international students to Australian universities most institutions have embarked on processes of 'internationalizing the curriculum' in attempts to create more meaningful and satisfying student learning experiences for foreign students. 'Internationalizing the curriculum' has developed a significant body of literature over the past twenty years e.g. the work of Leask and Carroll (2011). A range of models of course delivery have been instituted, including the provision of courses through quasi-independent universities in other countries, courses offered by agreement in selected institutions in 'host countries', provision of courses 'off-shore' (both face-to-face or through distance education), delivery of tuition in both the host country and Australia, and the opportunity for completion of entire programs of study in Australia.

While actual institutional survival is rarely at issue, the need to do more with less impinges on curriculum design in many institutions. Competition drives institutions to reconsider the necessity for any programs or

forms of delivery that may not be essential to the student learning experience. A current issue for science programs in Australia is the provision of laboratory time for students. On the one hand it is argued that the hands-on research experience in a laboratory is critical to the 'being and becoming' of a science graduate and appealing to prospective students. On the other the cost of providing laboratory hours in the curriculum is seeing hours cut and attempts to substitute these experiences with computer-simulated alternatives.

6. Communication and Balance

Communication and balance are highlighted here in a plea for a more effective treatment of curriculum issues in higher education. Almost universally in higher education institutions around the world there is a lack of effective communication about curriculum (and many other issues). Broad curriculum plans are imposed, often without sufficient consultation. In some instances curriculum is determined nationally for all institutions. Often the content of courses is seen as the domain of the 'subject experts' who work in 'silos' having little to do with others involved in the delivery of the package of learning experiences to students. Designers don't necessarily talk with process experts. Those responsible for improving the delivery of programs have little to do with the reality of 'coal-face' teaching and actual student learning. Too often little attempt is made to explain the curriculum to students. Questions of 'why we are studying this, in this way, and how it all fits together', usually get little attention. 'Curriculum' can bring all these interests together but its champions are hard to find. A partial addressing of this concern can be seen in 'The First Year Experience' focus taken in some institutions in North America

and Australia (e.g. Queensland University of Technology), whereby a much more holistic, integrated and coordinated approach is taken to providing the first-year university learning experience. Another encouraging move in some Australian institutions is the creation of a 'Curriculum Coordination Unit' and establishment of centres carrying 'curriculum' in their titles, such as the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre at La Trobe University.

Related to the need for communication is also a plea for more balance and order. Attention to issues of curriculum in higher education appear partial and in many cases a 'knee jerk reaction' to a crisis or anxiety about a perceived advantage gained by a competitor institution. Another common occurrence is the engagement in curriculum planning at broad levels within institutions followed by too little follow-through with too little resource allocation to allow desired changes to occur. Some attempt to address this can be seen in Australia in the Office of Learning and Teaching fellowship project 'Assuring Learning' which has a strong emphasis on whole-of-course curriculum design (Lawson, 2014).

Some institutions deal very well with one or two of the clusters of concerns shown

earlier in Figure 1. Few deal systematically and consistently with them all.

Conclusions

Globally, 'curriculum' is an underutilized concept in higher education. Comprehensive discussion of curriculum issues could yield great benefits to the sector in all countries irrespective of the stage of development of higher education, the structural arrangements for higher education, and the level and source of resourcing. Curriculum issues are not static, differing by location and over time. Technology, where available, provides useful options for enhancing student learning experiences and requires an appropriate curriculum response. Issues of purpose continue to be poorly elaborated and not well integrated into curricula. A somewhat piecemeal approach is often taken to curriculum development. Greater effort is needed to offer learning experiences that are directed towards students 'being and becoming' in a holistic, integrated and authentic way, through to graduation and beyond. Adequate periodic attention to a broad range of curriculum issues in higher education would raise the quality of student learning opportunities.

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