INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM DESIGN

Introduction

This study will use CDN's Virtual College Expo 2021 round table discussion titled '**Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design**', which took place in June 2021, as the initial focal point of current expert thinking within the college sector in Scotland. Prior discussion identified Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design as one of four key themes that the sector required to analyse in terms of identifying what if any, changes may be required to form a new perspective on the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Rationale

The way in which institutions approach the design of their curriculum varies across Scotland, with diverse demands put upon the process prior to delivery to the student. Traditionally, some of these demands include adherence to 'notional delivery hours', reliance on suitable specialist resources, as well as staffing and student funding. One of the reasons this theme was chosen as a key area for research, was there are few processes if any, that have a greater impact for the student and the college than that of how individual curricula are designed and delivered. The main goal of this research is to gauge the impact of this design process on others, and identify via a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods, the pivotal points of intervention for sector decision-makers where they can best align their curriculum to meet the future demands of student, employers, HEIs and wider society. It will also allow for more discussion around collective working across the sector.

Identified key areas of research

The discussion panel believes that the areas shown in Fig 1 are critical factors in improving approaches to curriculum design strategies post pandemic, and should be at the forefront of each decision maker's mind when deciding how to adapt, modify and diversify the offering colleges make to students.

Although this paper will go on to provide further rationale for these choices, it is clear at this early stage, that present approaches cannot remain the same. Furthermore, the over-arching theme surrounding the consideration of these elements, is one of cross-college and cross-sector collaboration with 'co-creator' roles being invaluable in the quality and effectiveness of any new offering.
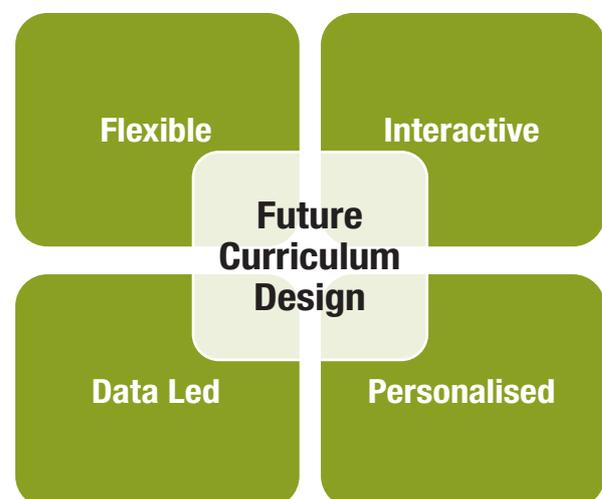

Flexible | Interactive

Future Curriculum Design

Data Led | Personalised

Fig 1.

Flexibility

It could be argued that course design that incorporates flexibility from the outset is nothing new. All successful courses have generally had an element trace of this instilled from the design stage.

However, there is now a discussion to be had on where the responsibility of flexibility lies that will allow this trait to be most effective in the future planning of courses. Assessment of most college programmes is bound by strict criteria, by various established awarding bodies that have, up until now, developed programmes for mostly on-site delivery in specific vocational subjects. How do organisations such as these envisage the capacity for more flexibility and guidance to centres post pandemic without central 'critical competencies' at the heart of the course being diminished or lost? How can colleges across Scotland stand behind any changes to these programmes and verify to employers that the qualifications are still as valid as they were? Also, college funding models and associated guidance from organisations such as the Scottish Funding Council would need to rethink some of how these courses are funded to allow greater capacity for flexibility at the college level, without which, senior managers would be restricted in their abilities to offer practically flexible courses to their learners. Finally, is a full analysis by curriculum teams at operational level required, to seek new ways of enhancing the accessibility and inclusiveness of courses by introducing blended, hybrid or online only delivery models?

🔍 RESEARCH QUESTION 1

What are the key factors that suppress curriculum innovation and enhancement in FE, and how can these be eliminated to maximise the potential for more a more flexible delivery model?

Interactive

The purpose of research in this area is threefold. Firstly, to what extent are curriculum offerings already 'interactive'? How much of what is being delivered online still involves a considerable amount of 'chalk and talk' which can often be less effective online? Are there any other means of delivering more theoretical aspects of curriculum utilising more innovative approaches? Secondly, 'interactive' suggests courses have an element of experiencing active participation, whether through specific technology or simulated scenarios in at least some part of the design and delivery of the curriculum. How do we identify what benefits are inherent on these types of activities , and who do they benefit? Can we improve the *interactivity* of courses by introducing innovative practice and perhaps upskilling staff to adopt new pedagogical approaches from the beginning of the course? Thirdly, curriculum must be designed in conjunction with learners. This again is not a new concept however, it is clear the options surrounding what were available to inform choices for the levels of interactivity, have changed considerably post pandemic.

🔍 RESEARCH QUESTION 2

How can the college sector improve the ways it embeds interactivity and active participation within a blended learning model, and what potential challenges could the sector face to achieve this?

Data led

With more and more colleges collecting more and more data from SIMD to KPI to student analytics and survey results to name but a few, the volume of data available in the sector that can help design improved experiences and outcome for students is vast. How can we utilise this data to enhance curriculum design? As was discussed by panel members, data is only useful if utilised appropriately and ethically and is not the whole story. How can we create a culture for data to be discussed at all levels within the sector that allows for honest, professional discussions to take place with course teams confident that doing so is not only worthwhile but to be encouraged as a means of improving? Data analysis using digital means of engagement is crucial in being able to adapt college systems that inform future course design across all institutions. By looking closely at the type of feedback students receive and providing systems will form an important part of this research.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3:

Over the academic year 2021-22, which data trends can the college sector identify as being of being most influential in future curriculum design and how can they be used to improve the student experience and outcomes post pandemic?

Personalised

This area is almost certainly the most difficult one for colleges to be able to deliver for their students, mainly due to the potential scale-down required to achieve it. This research will seek to identify easy wins for the sector in being able to achieve this, which start at application or induction stages. It will also look at the possibility of overhauling the rather antiquated systems for recognition of prior learning for students, allowing more students to have a more tailored experience from college courses, without the need to invest their time and funding on skills they already have. Again, funding models may need to change to provide this level of personalisation, which goes hand in hand with flexibility potential mentioned above. What matters to students? To what extent can institutions provide a personalised experience for students that is sustainable?

RESEARCH QUESTION 4:

Which elements of the college curriculum offering can be personalised over the next 12-18 months to meet the individual needs of the student, and what critical changes require to happen to achieve this?

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