

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM DESIGN

Introduction

The following report summarises key themes that were explored with a series of focus groups discussing the outputs from an *Approaches to Curriculum Design* roundtable dialogue that took place at the CDN College Expo 2021. The focus groups were conducted in February/March 2022 and consisted of lecturers, managers and senior managers working across the Scottish college sector.

This report seeks to provide an insight into the workings of those responsible for shaping curriculum design from within a variety of vocational areas. One of the most striking aspects of each session was the uniformity of thinking around: collective ownership in tackling and adapting established teaching practices, partnership working within institutions, and a willingness to work with colleagues across the sector. Consensus and discord in approaches are highlighted by identifying the basis of opinions to help facilitate further progress, draw attention to specific examples, and focus on barriers to effective change and how these can be managed or overcome.

Theme 1: Flexibility

QUESTION

“By the college sector working collaboratively, how can the curriculum design process allow for improved levels of flexibility of study, whilst maintaining employer confidence in the qualification?”

Each group was asked to consider the degree of flexibility present within their institutions' approaches to curriculum design prior to COVID and be prepared to discuss changes and their impacts, when looking at design post March 2022. Within the sessions, many identified and agreed that innovation in curriculum design on a more permanent basis would be required for the curriculum offer to reflect a post-COVID landscape.

The most common barriers identified which inhibited institutional flexibility included:

1. Resources

- a. Ability to provide sufficient volume of staff CPD for digital delivery methods
- b. Sector concerns at scale of change required
- c. Rigid college funding models
- d. Student inclusion and access concerns
- e. Digital estate financing for individual colleges

2. Systemic constraints

- Lack of flexibility of college systems, both inter-college and intra-college.
- Current perceptions of the workforce in relation to expected opening/working hours of colleges
- Perceived demands of 'inflexible' awarding bodies
- Lack of data-informed planning due to constraints of annual reporting
- Linked HEI and school sector timelines

Central Funding

There was broad consensus that a radical change in central funding models was a prerequisite for allowing institutions to deliver a more flexible student experience. As shown in Fig. 1, colleges presently work in 1-year cycles, with initial guidance on institutional financial targets not provided from main funding bodies until late in the academic calendar.

Current funding model implications for curriculum design:

- Funding guidance date leaves institutions insufficient time for creative curriculum planning
- 1-year cycle strategy seen by sector as "overly risk averse"
- Cycle hinders institutional autonomy
- Annual curriculum planning 'hijacked' mid-term leading to 'chase for credits'
- Lack of institutional confidence for innovation due to financial pressures

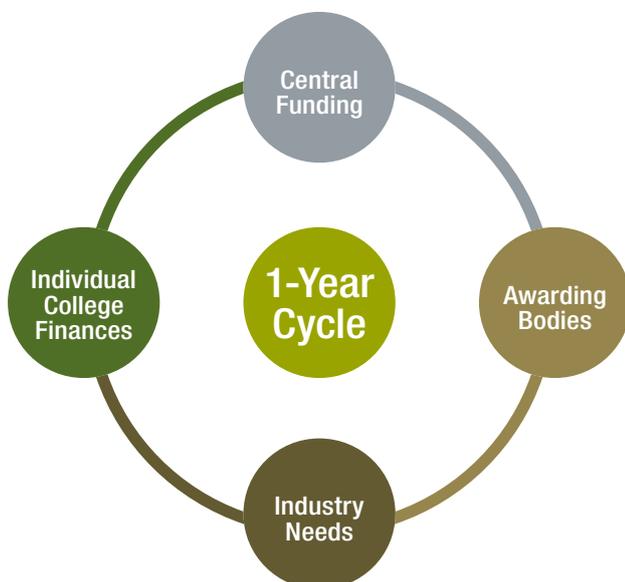


Fig. 1: 1-Year Cycle

A suggested solution to the issues above was for a flexible 2-5 year cycle from funding bodies. This would grow the capacity of institutions to recover shortfalls through flexible innovation and longer-term investment of resources needed to support strategies.

Awarding Organisations

Participants described the need for more effective engagement between institutions and awarding organisations specifically in terms of course design rules.

Unique Demands on College Finances

Senior Managers described the importance of funding bodies to acknowledge the unique financial demands placed on colleges based on geographic and socio-economic conditions to maintain their ability to standardise flexible provision across the sector.

Industry Needs

With an increased focus on gathering feedback on the needs of employers, institutions could develop a flexible response in line with local demand alongside the established apprenticeship offer. For example, those recently made unemployed post furlough, may only require limited upskilling having been absent from the workforce for only a short period of time. Already competent in their skillsets, development of additional digital, communication or creative skills via targeted short courses, would increase employment opportunities. This added flexibility in course provision may also improve college relationships with industry as training meets the direct demand from employers.

A high-quality and flexible approach would have the following benefits:

- Enable a greater number of students to access appropriate learning programmes
- Allow learners to access learning around job or family commitments
- Closer and more effective working with industry to design programmes that meet their needs
- Retention and attainment levels could increase as programmes respond to local demand

Theme 2: Interactivity

QUESTION

“How can the college sector improve how it embeds interactivity and active participation within a blended learning model and what potential challenges could the sector face in order to achieve this?”

Surprisingly, there were participants who described the challenges of sustaining active participation and interactivity within the traditional classroom environment. They expressed how challenging this theme was to translate online after what was a steep learning curve with the immediate shift to an online, and then subsequent blended delivery model.

The Physical Learning Space

As discussed as part of the previous theme, the focus on establishing and maintaining interactivity when delivering a blended learning model was as much about the students feeling part of a physical learning community, as it was about gaining practical knowledge.

Benefits of physical classroom environment:

- Social interaction
- Rapport with staff and peers
- Improved levels of pastoral support

These elements were particularly relevant to courses at SCQF Level 6 and under, with some struggling to interact with peers online, without having experienced the physical environment. Described as ‘of prime importance’ by many participants, being in a classroom was seen as the most successful means of developing a rapport with learners by staff, but also with learners interacting effectively with

each other. Essentially, the relationships formed in the physical space supported them to develop online, typically leading to a reduction in feelings of isolation. Where this was effective, it helped provide more opportunities for engagement and interactivity. As rapport and confidence grew within the cohort, it was felt this allowed greater levels of flexibility to deliver a higher percentage of the course online as time progressed.

The key focus when deciding what elements of a programme moved online initially was influenced by operational factors; available space, number of students allowed on campus, subjects that had to be on campus due to the practical nature of the activity. Moving forward, all participants agreed and highlighted the following things that need to be taken into consideration when developing blended programmes and would be better suited as a part of on campus delivery:

- Topics that required greater levels of interaction/ lecturer support
- Opportunities for skills development and/or collaboration
- Building capacity for high quality interactions with students

Student Motivation

Many participants spoke of initial difficulties in motivating students as part of online delivery. However, after curriculum designers requested and responded to student feedback on the ‘digital balance’ of the course, students in the main, found the digital experience more productive.

Key elements to designing productive blended learning:

- Manage resources appropriately with a sliding scale of deployment based on course content
- Include student voice in planning and course evaluation
- Monitor impact of online vs. on-campus delivery
- Be open minded when assessing benefits of online vs. on-campus delivery

Evidenced benefits of blended learning:

- Student focus due to reduced classroom distraction
- Increased understanding of theory and technical elements, which led to improved practical skills
- More opportunity for formative assessment to determine learner progression and need for targeted support

These examples came from lecturing staff who used a blended delivery model in areas such as engineering, languages, and computing.

Staff CPD

All participants expressed the need for more pedagogical training to deliver blended learning successfully. Research participants predicted blended learning would form part of future delivery in years to come; lecturers and curriculum design staff were keen for leadership to acknowledge the need for more resources to meet these demands. Just as 'traditional' pedagogy has been honed over years of research, professional study and practice, there appears to be a need for the college workforce to have access to innovative and impactful pedagogical teaching methods for blended learning.

Project-Based Learning

Participants expressed a desire to increase the volume and quality of project-based learning (PBL) as an underpinning principle of future curriculum design. This mirrors the development of SQA NextGen HN courses which encourages the adoption of PBL as a central theme. Effective PBL may be cross-curricular as well as cross-level, providing learners with numerous opportunities to develop skills. It is also essential to utilise the shared knowledge base available across curriculum areas. Benefits outlined by participants of effective PBL include:

- Increased engagement
- Greater relevance to industry practice
- Enhanced opportunities for collaboration (both staff and students)
- More effective, timely feedback – with a real focus on skills
- Reduced assessment burden on staff and students.

Industry Driven Programmes

Opportunities have always been available to link with industry to design programmes, but participants stressed that there was no better time to review both the content, structure, and delivery modes to align these to the needs of industry. Consideration must be given to what is needed as a new employee in addition to what is needed when upskilling the current workforce. Close collaboration is already in place across some elements of the sector, however effective collaboration takes time, effort, effective partnership and resource to ensure that it is productive for both employers and colleges.

Theme 3: Personalisation

QUESTION

“Which elements of the college curriculum offering can be personalised over the next 12-18 months to meet the individual needs of students and what changes are required in order to achieve this?”

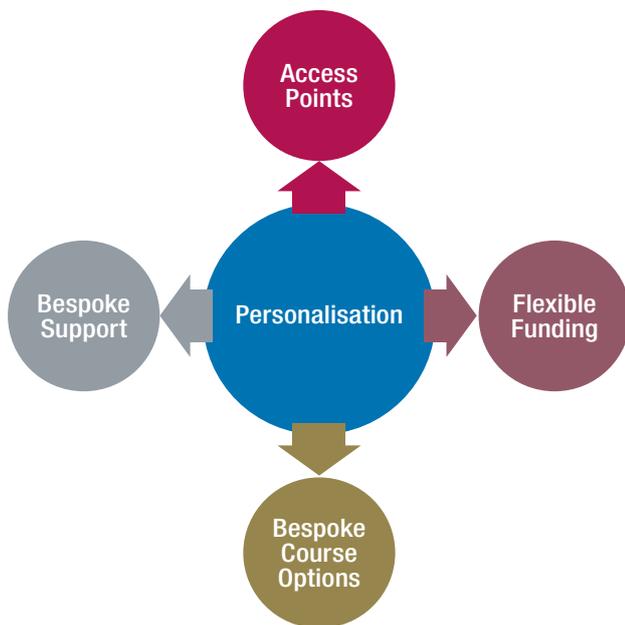


Figure 2: Personalisation

Figure 2 shows the four main elements that, if achievable, may allow for a more personalised experience for learners. Almost all participants accepted that providing the greatest level of personalisation would prove challenging, costly and require the most radical of thinking to fulfil. A significant barrier is the ability to plan for and continue to support, wide variations of delivery within a single course, demanding pragmatic impact analysis around which elements could be personalised to integrate choice for learners.

Access Points

For the student experience to be truly personal, varying methods of access to learning and teaching would be required during programmes of study. Bearing in mind the complexity of course formats, a realistic and measured approach as to how this was managed would be essential. One example described hybrid delivery of lessons, combining in-person classroom delivery with remote students joining simultaneously via MS Teams. Video and course materials were then provided asynchronously, allowing students to learn at time that suited them best. This type of hybrid and blended offering, although time consuming to prepare, was described as ‘short-term pain for long-term gain’ and added considerably more flexibility for learners to interact with others and progress through their course.

Bespoke Course Options

COVID resulted in a rise of applications for short courses. The sector is being challenged to re-evaluate its offering to help those requiring targeted upskilling or retraining. There are clear advantages for students, but major disadvantages for colleges whose financial planning across the sector relies heavily on the annual enrolment of full-time students. One solution could be to increase the breadth of optional choices within current frameworks for 1-year full-time courses. This would allow for a bespoke portfolio of skills and body of work that best show the skillsets of learners when applying for employment or further study.

Flexible Funding

As discussed in Theme 1, changes to the present model of funding for institutions is a prerequisite in realising innovative freedom across curriculum design. Indeed, participants stated that this would be crucial in allowing a more personalised experience moving forward. One example outlined a challenge with local authority criteria for ICT equipment that best suited student needs as part of their bursary equipment pack. Those planning for FE level programmes said that if they had more flexibility to purchase specific ICT equipment, students would be able to engage far more effectively.

There are some options available when enrolling on personalised courses, but this often requires some financial contribution from students and can result in difficulties when accessing other financial support afforded to full-time students.

Bespoke Student Support

Of the four elements in Fig.2, bespoke support was particularly interesting as it was felt that much of this was already in place. Well-funded and providing significant benefits for students, bespoke support contributed to improved student success rates across the sector. It was recognised that during the pandemic, the complexity and workload within this area increased dramatically. A common concern was how support would be funded going forward, with others suggesting investment in the use of technology to offer flexibility in generating meaningful feedback to and from students more regularly. Over time and with shared sector knowledge and finance, college system integration within the following areas could help improve communication with individual students and ultimately, the overall student experience:

1. Real-time academic progress
2. Funding and attendance status (including support and advice from benefits agencies)
3. Health and well-being information and online support
4. Articulation and employment route information
5. Student Association portal for events and student feedback
6. Improved accessibility options for communication

Conclusions

A salient aspect of the research was the differing perceptions of post-COVID curriculum design opportunities and benefits to all key stakeholders. While many had some success delivering digitally as part of the crisis management stage of the pandemic, there was a clear perception and worry that some in the sector see moving learning and teaching online as a cost-cutting exercise which would be detrimental to the student experience. What is also clear is that even though all institutions are bound to the same model of funding and academic cycle, there were wide variations in how changes to curriculum design were managed between colleges, and in cases within individual colleges. The consequences of such disparity can negatively impact on the ability of leaders and managers to transition staff to change. While this may present some significant challenges initially, there are many opportunities for the sector to collaborate, share practice and learn from each other in a timely and effective manner to inform in-year and future planning based on the experience of others.

Furthermore, with almost all COVID restrictions having now been removed, the research points to a risk of the sector unwittingly, sliding back to pre-March 2020 design and delivery models, thus losing much of the momentum for change. To avoid this, transparent and mutually-agreed strategic anchor points for post-COVID approaches to curriculum design, will be critical in balancing the needs of all stakeholders. This will allow the sector to move forward collectively with proper support from key sectoral partners.

Due to COVID, the curriculum design process within the college sector has almost certainly changed permanently for many. Even though most of the sector are in the initial stages of integrating new models of delivery, many will utilise blended, hybrid and remote approaches in addition to face-to-face only approaches in the future. There is a recognition that this paradigm shift will take years and further investment to assure staff, students, and industry of the merits of the strategy. Nonetheless, there is a common understanding across the sector of the necessity and importance for this shift in curriculum design.

The importance of the themes identified and discussed in this report cannot be under-estimated in terms of how well the sector can adapt to the changing needs of students. It has learned a great deal over the past 2 years about overcoming challenges and finding solutions to a variety of curriculum design issues. The sector has also learned that without the support and evolution of other key stakeholders, colleges are restricted in how they can plan for and manage the needs of post-COVID students.

Ultimately, there appears to be agreement around developing a sustainable and effective curriculum, where the core principles of learning and teaching remain at the heart of all decision-making. The key themes highlighted in this report will be vitally important in helping Scotland's colleges develop a curriculum offer that delivers the skills required to evolve the future workforce and meet the demands of industry.

Further Research

Having concluded that the solution to meeting the goals raised at College Expo 21 lies in a multilateral approach from key organisations as well as the institutions themselves; interest was expressed around further research to follow this journey in the 22-23 Academic session and beyond. Such research could explore trends and approaches implemented across the sector, comparing success in relation to a range of parameters and KPIs to identify strategies that would be worthy of further dissemination to the sector.



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