Restructuring the Curriculum – Pedagogy and Practical Implications

Dr Victoria Honeyman, University of Leeds

APSA T&L Conference, Baltimore, February 2023

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR REFERENCE WITHOUT DISCUSSION WITH THE AUTHOR AS THIS IS A WORKING PAPER. THANK YOU.

Abstract:

The University of Leeds has been engaging in a comprehensive strategy of curriculum redesign since August 2021. This paper is a discussion of the curriculum redesign within the School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS). The initial strategy involved the drawing together of a number of strategies within an umbrella approach with the aim being to create better programmes for students and simplifying the practical process of delivering those programmes.

Within POLIS we began by examining our curriculum structures. Within those discussions, we needed to consider what our learning aims and objectives were and how they could be best achieved. We then needed to bring practical considerations into that discussions to ensure that our plans were achievable and reasonable within a large campus-based university. Within those discussions we needed to balance what students want and need with the needs and wants of a tired staff body, campus limitations and changes within higher education more generally. Can we use new and improving technology to help us with these aims? Is that beneficial or counter-productive?

While the project is still in its early stages, within POLIS we have made some considerable progress and that progress has now allowed us to consider wider issues, primarily assessment. This paper will outline the "Curriculum Redefined' project and how we are implementing this within POLIS as well as providing some recommendations for the future of strategic implementation.

PLEASE NOTE: This is a first draft paper and therefore lacks all necessary references and supporting literature. Obviously this will be included for later versions.

Paper:

Introduction

Higher education globally is in a perpetual period of change. The 'norms' of teaching and learning change constantly as new methods are introduced and trialled alongside new technology. Students in the UK have paid tuition fees since the mid-1990s, changing their relationship with universities, and government has increasingly aimed to regulate and adapt that relationship. This changing relationship has driven reform, encouraging universities to

invest in teaching and the wider student experience and to encourage staff with expertise and interest in teaching and learning to specialise far more.

The impact of COVID on the higher education sector was extensive and permanently changed the face of higher education. As with many other sectors, universities were forced to pivot online in the space of a few days. While some universities had some experience of online teaching, for many, this was a new era of teaching and they needed to move quickly. Support staff, academics, learning technologists and administrators all upskilled in the space of a few weeks – a magnificent feat replicated across many sectors. New platforms were rolled out and training was delivered, both officially from learning technologists and unofficially from colleagues and friends who had knowledge of the technology. Colleagues, young and old upskilled virtually overnight. Doors which had remained closed for many years in universities, where digital learning was often considered somewhat niche and overly expensive, were thrown open. Tech firms, which had dabbled in learning technology, suddenly discovered an untapped market and began pouring money into development, and universities began to pour money into purchasing different platforms to keep teaching going as lockdowns circled the globe. Academic life changed overnight for academics, administrators and students, and that change was not always easy nor was it always welcomed.

While extensive digital teaching and the use of new platforms is clearly a huge change to the sector, it is not the only evolution we are facing. One of the largest impacts of COVID was that pre-existing problems and gaps within universities were exacerbated. Producing high quality teaching and research is expensive and time consuming. Students and staff needed more support, more help and more guidance than universities had previously provided. This, at a time when international travel, and therefore international student numbers, were restricted, and domestic students were often locked away from campus. This combination of different factors meant that the 'old' ways of operating pre-Covid were, across many institutions, being reconsidered and reformed to reflect some of the newer realities.

At the University of Leeds, a new Deputy Vice Chancellor brought about the opportunity to bring together numerous new and existing strategies under a new umbrella strategy 'Curriculum Redefined'. At the heart of this strategic vision was the learning experience of our students, linking together pedagogic issues with more practical concerns. The aim was to use new technology and structural standardisation to streamline the curriculum and create opportunities for students. This change was root-and-branch involving every school in the university, impacted on every supporting department, and eventually fundamentally changing the offering we make to students. It involves the use of technology in teaching, changes in assessment, work on inclusivity and widening participation to name just some of the key initiatives, and the aim was for this work to be 'completed' in ten years. The term 'completed' is a subjective term as it could be argued that these processes are in constant flux rather than having a designated end point.

While the end point might not be entirely clear, the starting point was. The first focus of Curriculum Redefined was on the structure of programmes across the university, and that is what this paper will focus on. This paper outlines the aims of that process, how it was

instituted in the School of Politics and International Studies and what lessons can be learned from the practice.

Motivations for Structural Change

For many universities in the UK, their campuses were built in the 19th or 20th century. The campuses are often beautiful – a mixture of traditional, imposing architecture and modern-day sleek planning and building. Regardless of their aesthetic, one common factor across many universities is a lack of space. By buying land and building more, universities have tried to deal with these constraints, but every time that a university increases in size, they often increase in terms of their student population, meaning constraints still exist. Even if a university is capable of building a campus big enough to cope with the teaching and pastoral needs of its students (never mind their community and well-being needs) it doesn't add more hours into the teaching timetable. As we offer choice to students, we often find it impossible to timetable. The obvious, but unpopular solution to this, is to either limit the number of students or limit module and programme choice. By reducing the number of modules available to students, the necessity for concurrent seminars or lectures would be reduced, putting less pressure on staff and infrastructure. While this might cause some disquiet from students who may want more extensive choice, this could be reduced by shaping choice – allowing choice within set boundaries. This structuring may prevent students from selecting certain modules (often those outside of a student's programme interests), but for many they would still be able to select modules they were interested in, many of which were related to their studies. By considering both the pedagogic needs of the programme, and the popularity of specific modules year-on-year, module lists could be produced which allowed students to choose modules which were often popular for their cohort but remove choice to those modules which were rarely selected. This would allow a university to manage a reduction in module access and reduce the impact on the student population. This is the dilemma, and the solution, which is being used at the University of Leeds.

The new approach was labelled 'Curriculum Redefined' and it aimed to tackle a number of pressing issues. While the issue of timetabling and the structure of programmes was clearly a crucial element, it was not the only issue. Following on from programme reform, the strategy would also focus on assessment, feedback, widening participation and student success and digital teaching and learning. This ten-year programme was designed to deal with each issue separately where appropriate, but also to run in tandem where necessary. While this was clearly a sensible approach to take it did mean that big strategic reforms could be taking place at the same time, meaning staff, particularly those leading and driving the change, could easily become burnt out or overwhelmed. To help with this, the university allotted a very large budget to this strategy and a large proportion of that budget was put towards recruitment. Each school in the university was allocated funding for two new members of staff, labelled the 'CR' academics. These individuals were recruited to aid the schools in their reforms and bring their considerable skill set to the Curriculum Redefined process.

As with any package of reform and change, the process has had some successes and some elements which have not run as smoothly as everyone would hope. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor leading the process for the University of Leeds, Professor Jeff Grabill, had experience of this reform at his former institution – Michigan State University. Grabill wrote on his views on curriculum design in his co-authored book *Design for Change in Higher Education* (2022). The process of reform, while obviously having some similarities, also had key differences. Michigan State University has approximately 50,000 students while the University of Leeds has approximately 40,000 students, meaning that both are large, varied institutions. However, the key difference is perhaps the educational systems and traditions which they exist within. The norms of any system vary from country and country and often institution to institution. This paper highlights how a new approach can be refreshing but also challenging.

The Curriculum Redefined Process

Prior to the COVID pandemic the University of Leeds, in common with many other universities in the UK and elsewhere, had a number of strategies relating to student education. The introduction of tuition fees in the 1990s changed the dynamic of university education in the UK and meant that there was increasing oversight of student education from government and increasing demands from students themselves. This coincided with a movement within the academic sector to focus on student education as not simply an activity which needed to be performed in order to ensure the financial stability of the institution, but something which was of value and therefore needed attention and specialist study. Those who had long held this view found themselves both vindicated and increasingly supported by a growing recognition of the value of pedagogic study alongside cutting-edge research and they worked to bring high quality research and teaching together in a more obvious sense than had been possible before. The tension (or synergy) between research and teaching has not been resolved, but it is becoming more balanced.

Over the last 20 years in the UK, the focus on student education has intensified, including the attention of government. The Office for Students in the UK has reinforced a focus on quality teaching and learning and often encouraged or driven policy change and practice. The individual strategies which the University of Leeds had adopted tended to speak to the priorities of government and Quality Assurance, as well as looking to the future of Higher Education and the needs of students. Progress was made on individual strategies, often at an uneven rate with some schools (including my own) tending to be at the forefront of change while others were much slower to adopt strategic aims, if they were adopted at all.

COVID was a massive shot in the arm for the higher education sector in the UK. Institutions across the country, indeed across the world, that had spoken of digital learning and online teaching is slightly abstract terms were forced, overnight, to embrace new technologies and upskill their workforce in order to keep their establishments functioning. Students also needed to learn new skills and new ways of learning, and all of this was done in an extremely short period of time under the extreme pressure of a global pandemic. Change, which had long been spoken of as a future aspiration, materialised in days and weeks while university campuses sat empty. As the new reality became a little more normalised, universities began to consider how they could move forward and at the University of Leeds

this involved the pulling together of existing strategies and a new strategic drive to change and improve student education. Some of the strategies which were pulled into this overarching approach were not new – they had existed in slightly different formats before. However, they were re-evaluated and reinvigorated, being brought into a longer process of change which was to be driven by the central university functions. Schools would be allowed to make their own decisions on assessment or structure, within certain rules and constraints, but they would need to be able to explain their thinking to a central team. Simply opting out or acting slowly in order to avoid change was not permitted.

The process began with the creation of a central team who would lead Curriculum Redefined across the institution. This team were recruited internally and each leading member was given a specific policy responsibility. Together they would work on establishing the 'rules' of curriculum redefined and the order of change. The first strategic focus was programme redesign, and in some ways, this would also be the largest and the most difficult. The University of Leeds has nine faculties housing over 30 different schools. While there are many similarities across the faculties and schools, there were historic discrepancies and differences as well as some subject specific differences. In addition, there were certain professional requirements to consider (including subjects with external accreditation such the Schools of Law, Dentistry and Medicine for example). This meant that there were some 'norms' within the institution which were not actual norms across the wider university. Different schools could have different credit weightings for modules and different programme structures, which makes a modular university system very difficult. Couple this with the thousands of modules which a student could realistically select during their degree programme, and it became clear that some additional rules would be required at both undergraduate and postgraduate level to streamline the system. By creating certain rules around credit weightings and streamlining module choice, this would make the timetabling of degree programmes easier. However, there were costs to this. In addition to the huge amount of time and effort it would require making this change, at a time when staff were already exhausted after the COVID pandemic, the final result would ultimately reduce choice for students. However, those leading the project argued that the choice for students was, in some ways, illusionary as timetabling constraints would always mean that students could select modules but not actually be able to study for them because of clashes between lectures and seminars.

The process began for individual schools in August 2021. Several presentations on Curriculum Redefined were held, but these were, perhaps deliberately, a little light on detail. Schools were encouraged to rethink their own curriculum and their pedagogic aims, but without a set of rules or norms. This allowed each school to make their own decisions and choose their own direction of travel based on their expert knowledge of their fields. However, this loose approach also allowed schools to virtually 'opt out' of the process if they wished. For some this would be justifiable as their programmes were working well or had been recently amended. For others, this was not the case. However, even for those programmes changes would need to be made. Within POLIS, exploratory work had already been done previously on a core first-year one semester module. The aim of the module was to ensure that all students would finish their first year of study with a set of skills and knowledge which they would then build on in their next years of study. This would then be supplemented by their other core modules within their first year, adding more subject-

specific detail to their curriculum. However, at the core of this structural change was one issue - belonging. Our students, like everyone, had suffered with isolation and loneliness. They had all lost their student experience and had often found online learning challenging and isolating – as had many academics. By creating a large, compulsory module for all students within our school, which spanned a full academic year with weekly meetings and teaching events, we wanted to build a sustained community for our students and help them 'belong' to their school.

Introducing such a large module created a number of challenges. Firstly, the actual content of the module needed to be established. A traditional 'skills' module would simply not work in this context and would be neither intellectually stimulating enough nor expansive enough to justify such a large module. However, by combining skill building with key concepts, approaches and subject specific tasks, we could create a bedrock of knowledge for our students, allowing them to develop important skills through their studies. Both of these aspects of learning would then be built on in years 2 and 3 of their programmes. Secondly, we needed to think carefully about the implications on our wider curriculum structure beyond the rules which Curriculum Redefined would eventually introduce. Should we maintain a first-year structure which was largely identical for all our students, building in the flexibility for students to move programme easily, or should we make each programme more distinct, more specialised? This specialism would reduce flexibility but would create a specific identity (and community) **within** the programmes, while the 40-credit module would build community **between** the programmes. The number of students moving between programmes is relatively small, so it could be argued that the majority of the students were having the content of their degree programmes determined by the administrative needs of a very small number. We would need to establish which modules (either on our catalogue or created in the process) were needed for a specific degree.

That process led us to tackle much wider questions on what our disciplines should be. What should a politics degree be, beyond the Subject Benchmark statement? A more light-touch or superficial approach to the project might not have generated such questions but in using the strategy to redesign our structures we needed to be happy that the end result was representative of our field of study, not simply convenient or the easiest option available. The only way to answer this question was to ask the experts - our academic staff. The short time frame certainly proved a challenge in accomplishing this, but it also focused minds.

At the same time as these more existential questions were being asked, more guidance was being released on the 'rules' of Curriculum Redefined. Certain norms had to be established within the university structures on credit weightings, for example, and in order to establish a more workable timetable for the campus, choice had to be limited. A key part of the justification for this change was that the current variety granted to students was often not real, as their timetables simply could not include all the combinations they were entitled to theoretically select. Alongside core modules, students would now be limited to up to three lists of modules, with no more than six modules listed in each. That would mean that alongside their core modules, students would, in any academic year, have a maximum of eighteen modules to select from, plus potentially an option module (which could be taken in any school across the university). This was still a large choice, although some academics did

wonder whether this would impact on student recruitment, while others argued that students would still consider the choice extensive.

Within POLIS I began a major review of our structures and modules. This involved establishing what the constraints and key features of the new strategy were, and how we could best use the structure to shape our programmes. For Taught Postgraduate (PGT) programmes, the rules were (for POLIS) fairly simple. Each programme had to have two distinct core modules, totalling 60 credits (30 credit each) with a total of 120 credit of core modules and 60 options. Within POLIS, each PGT programme would have two core modules, plus a dissertation totalling 120 credits. For many programmes this was fairly simple to institute. Indeed, several already fulfilled this structural requirement. For those that did not, each programme lead, in conjunction with colleagues, consider what an additional core module should be, and if that was not available from the current offering, it would be written. For module options, the choice was limited to a list of six modules, and these were again selected by the programme leads, in conjunction with any colleagues they wished to discuss them with, to reflect both the choice available within the school but also included any modules that were particularly relevant to the programme. The most challenging element of this part of Curriculum Redefined for POLIS came on a Master's programme where the focus was on methodology rather than content driven. In order to rewrite that programme, new modules were required, which obviously took considerably more time to complete. However, as part of that process, the rationale of the programme was re-evaluated and that was an important process for the programme lead and colleagues to undertake.

For the undergraduate programmes, a different approach was required. By the very nature of our programmes, colleagues tended to teach on modules in multiple programmes, but often found themselves more predominantly associated with one particular field. To institute change, it was essential to ensure that staff were aware of what was being asked for by the strategy and empower them to make meaningful contributions to that process. While they might not agree with every decision made, everyone could be heard and know that they had been heard and that was key to acceptance and buy-in for the project. For each single-honours programme parented by the school, the programme leads were asked to hold group meetings with all interested academic staff members. This meant some members of academic staff were invited to just one set of meetings while others were invited to several, depending on their specific teaching contributions to each programme. At each event the programme leader, after discussion with me, produced a 'pencil-sketch' of the programme going forward. This was important as it focused discussion and allowed individuals to agree or disagree with specific aspects of the project, rather than focus on generalities. After the first meetings, the 'pencil-sketches' were revisited and amended, reflecting the comments from colleagues wherever possible. Some changes could not be made, and this was communicated to colleagues in the meetings so they could understand the rationale behind changes and what was logistically possible. The meetings were very positive and even when colleagues did not agree with the general 'rules' of the process, they understood what was required and tried to work within the rules to achieve their general aim for the programmes.

While some programmes were reasonably straightforward administratively to reorganise, some were far more complicated. Joint honours programmes generally require close relationships between the partner schools and the programmes often have specific features which need protecting to preserve their distinctive nature and their pedagogic strengths. For each different set of programmes, of which there were many, meetings (often several) had to be held between the two (or more) participating schools and each needed distinct plans. This was hugely time consuming, and different schools and departments often had a slightly different interpretation of rules and guidance, meaning that decisions often had to be referred back to the central Curriculum Redefined team for clarification. This could take time, and some schools did not want to refer back decisions in the hope that they could gain quiet acquiescence at some point later in the process. Sometimes they were able to successfully argue their case, which was a success for them, but did raise some questions on the universality of the rules.

Another set of programmes which caused issues were pathway programmes. These were degree programmes where a group of students all began on one programme, but some selected or were awarded the opportunity to change their degree programme while studying. For example, within POLIS a student could enrol on the BA Politics programme, but then request at the end of their first year to move onto the BA Politics and Parliamentary Studies programme, which integrated a one-year placement in Westminster in their studies. This required them to achieve certain marks in their first year and attend an interview, so it was not an automatic move, but it meant that for a small number of students, they needed a specific pathway building for them. Another example would be the Quantitative Methods pathways on the Politics, International Relations and International Development degrees. Each needed its own set of core modules and its own set of 'baskets' creating, listing the available modules for each programme at each stage of study. This was obviously very time consuming and involved bring together various individuals to agree or amend changes. Additionally, the programmes co-exist meaning that the whole reform had to be seen as a whole, rather than as smaller pieces. As the Director of Student Education, and Curriculum Redefined lead, I was the only person who could see the whole picture being created. This meant a huge amount of pressure was placed on the planning skills often of one person, and the success or failure of the scheme was often impacted by the attributes or weaknesses of those individuals.

Other schools faced different challenges to those experienced by the School of Politics and International Relations. The general structure of our programmes, while not fitting perfectly within the Curriculum Redefined guidance, was fairly similar so it meant that the changes needed were extensive but not revolutionary. For other schools, the changes required to fit into the framework were enormous, requiring them to not only rethink their programme structures, but to try and work those programmes into a framework which was not built for them. This could be viewed as a positive move – it is always important to keep evaluating and revisiting our programmes to check their suitability, effectiveness and even popularity within the wider field, as well as considering the requirements of professional qualifications, QA standards and industry-wide norms. However, forcing all programmes across a large university into a specific framework, which is not built to recognise the distinct nature of different degree programmes, can be not only hugely challenging but also hugely problematic and, undoubtedly, careful conversations and planning were required to deal

with these issues. The framework also assumed that students in any school might wish to take modules in any other school across the university. While that may be true for a small number of students, many fill their studies with subjects in similar fields (so while they may not remain 'in-school' for their option modules, they often remain within their faculty or in a related faculty – it is rare for a medical student, for example, to take a module within POLIS). While standardization would undoubtedly by beneficial for many students, there were some programmes were exceptions could be made without damaging student experience.

Once decisions over structure were made, the next step in the process was administratively making changes. New paperwork was created to try and reduce the administrative burden, with additional resource being brought into the Student Education Service and the Marketing teams to help deal with the catalogue and coursefinder changes.[1] The forms themselves were not long but did have to be completed in conjunction with programme leads. This could be done fairly easily where change had already been agreed, but where there was more contentious issues at play, it required additional support from the Faculty to ensure the timely completion of forms. These forms were then submitted to the University Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees and then the Programme Approval Groups before being finally signed off by the University. All of this was done on a short timetable. Within POLIS the detailed planning for programmes began in July 2022 (once the guidance on Curriculum Redefined had been established and worked through) and the forms needed to be completed by the end of January 2023. The PGT programmes had a longer lead time, although this was not clear at a departmental level, so we worked to our January 2023 deadline for all programmes. In total, every UG and PGT programme within POLIS was amended (12 parented programmes and numerous other joint honours programmes).

The Curriculum Redefined Staff – Benefits and Challenges

As part of the Curriculum Redefined project, differences between different schools and departments became clear. Some schools within the university had a large number of Teaching and Scholarship staff, while others had none at all. Teaching and Scholarship staff (T&S) are academics within the University of Leeds who focus their attention and time on teaching and pedagogic research. They receive a smaller allocation of time for their scholarship (research on pedagogy) than their Teaching and Research colleagues (T&R) and their work is not eligible for the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In some schools, their T&S colleagues were vital to their work and their pedagogic focus has contributed to reforms within the school. For other schools, they had no T&S colleagues at all, meaning all teaching was undertaken by T&R members of staff. The focus of the university has traditionally been research-led, with teaching being an important aspect of promotion and recruitment practices, but often of lesser importance than research excellence. With the introduction of T&S staff, this did begin to change, but the change was slow and often piecemeal, due to the differing structures in different departments and schools.

[1] Coursefinder is a UK database which lists details of University degree programmes for prospective students. Its contents need to be accurate as students based their applications on these entries and universities within the UK are required to have updated and accurate coursefinder entries approx. 18 months before a degree start date for UG programmes, and approx. 12 months before the commencement of a PGT programme.

As part of the Curriculum Redefined project, teaching became a key priority of the university, and this meant that the status of Teaching and Scholarship staff began to increase. Individuals who were expert teachers and leaders in pedagogic research began to be recognised and work began on how to rethink recruitment and promotion pathways to reflect this change. The speed of these changes was accelerated when it announced that 100 new T&S members of staff would be recruited as part of the Curriculum Redefined project. The aim of this recruitment was to build in pedagogic capacity across the university, allowing different teaching strategies and approaches to be designed and implemented without adding to already high workloads. Each school would be funded for two T&S staff and, as part of their contract, they would be allocated 20% of their time for specific Curriculum Redefined projects alongside their 20% scholarship allocation and 60% teaching and community allocations. For many schools, including POLIS, the decision was made to hire an early career academic and a senior lecturer/associate professor grade academic to these posts. The purpose of this was to ensure leadership within the CR specific projects but also develop early career colleagues within the teaching field. The calibre of the staff recruited was extremely high and they entered the university with enthusiasm.

One of the key challenges faced by T&S academics at the University of Leeds prior to the hiring of the new Curriculum Redefined staff was a lack of certainty on the expectations of them. The university did not have a detailed job profile for either T&S or T&R staff, due to differing expectations within each school and faculty. Instead, expectations were set at local levels, feeding into more general job descriptions, monitored via the Annual Academic Review process (with the relevant Head of School and, often, the Director of Research and Innovation) or the Staff Review and Development Scheme, held with a senior colleague to discuss training needs and professional development. With no single job profile, each individual school had tended to write their own T&S profile, and no two were the same. Some were expansive and allowed T&S staff considerable freedom, similar to that enjoyed by their T&R colleagues, while others were extremely restrictive, forbidding T&S staff from supervising PhD students, applying for leave to write scholarly articles on pedagogy or even apply for small research grants for pedagogic projects. Due to these differing profiles, progression and promotion, which was dealt with by central university function, could be very difficult to engage with. While there is a specific teaching and scholarship pathway to promotion, it had to reflect the limitations of some T&S roles without discriminating against individuals on those profiles, while also maintaining an even playing field for all academic staff. In practice, this did not work particularly well for T&S staff. The introduction of 100 new T&S Curriculum Redefined staff made this process considerably harder but also made a timely resolution more necessary.

For the incoming T&S Curriculum Redefined staff there were a number of challenges. It was certainly beneficial for them to all join the university within a short timespan, allowing them to create links and a support network. However, as the project spanned all the schools within the university, it was almost impossible to write one role descriptor for every new member of staff, meaning each school was left to determine what their new staff members should be doing. This was not something all schools were aware of ahead of time, and the details were often fairly slow in coming through which meant that some new staff members did struggle to determine how they should be spending their time. For some, this allowed them a certain degree of freedom to learn about their new department and university. For

others it created uncertainty and meant that they struggled to find a focus beyond their teaching. This was largely resolved as new projects came online and individuals were given specific tasks but it did lead to some uncertainty in the early days of their employment. For the individual schools, it also created some uncertainty – how much time should these members of staff be allocated for Curriculum Redefined issues and what would they be? While the new members of staff were clearly an excellent addition to the university and brought with them a whole range of valuable skills, their recruitment was not without difficulties and could have been a much smoother process, which would have aided the new members of staff.

Lessons Learned

When the Curriculum Redefined strategy was outlined to the University of Leeds staff, there was some degree of scepticism surrounding the project. How would this strategy – perhaps any strategy – focused on curriculum redesign be able to create uniformity within the university while retaining the niche elements of each school? In some quarters of the university, that question is still being asked. For those schools where their popularity is based (at least partly) on breadth of choice (including many joint honours degrees), limiting that choice could be a form of academic self-harm. Within all schools, pedagogic discussions have had to be held to decide what the defining features of each degree programme are and how they can be protected or enhanced within the strategy. Some schools, including POLIS, have accepted the strategy enthusiastically and used it to enhance our programmes, speed up planning and identify gaps within our curriculum. This has not been easy, but it is easier when there is an institution-wide impetus to 'get things done', especially when change involves multiple different schools across the university. For other schools, Curriculum Redefined is a strategy they would prefer to avoid entirely, but that has not been possible and even in those schools, changes have had to be made.

Inevitably, Curriculum Redefined reduces the choice for students, on paper at least, The counter argument to this is that the choice was always somewhat illusionary – while students could select any module in theory, in practice they could not because of timetabling limitations. Therefore, it could be argued, that this rationalization was also a more realistic structure to provide prospective students with. The strategy certainly required more regularization of rules and norms, which affected some schools more than others. Within POLIS, the changes were extensive but not disruptive, meaning we could make the changes fairly easily within our pre-existing structures. Our experience of the introduction of Curriculum Redefined was daunting in theory, but in practice it was not damaging to our programmes nor did it undermine our understanding (or that of the Quality Assurance team) of what our programmes should be and should cover. Indeed, it allowed us to make some changes which would have been more difficult without the strategy, and provided a direction of travel and an impetus for change across the university which was hugely beneficial for making changes. Our programmes were slightly reduced in terms of optional choice, but the core was stronger and more focused which could only be beneficial for students and for us as their teachers. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and it will be several years before we are able to fully measure the success (or failure) of Curriculum Redefined on our programmes and student numbers.

There were downsides to the introduction of the strategy. These were largely due to the scale of the project, the differences between the schools (which were vast in some cases) and the desire to be flexible creating some degree of uncertainty within the process. The administrative process was also, on occasion, difficult. At any university seeking to streamline and simplify its curriculum, it could easily be argued that 'to get to the end point, I wouldn't start from here', even though we all have to start in imperfect places. Flexibility is key to the process but rigidity is also key. The 'rules' need to be in place before the process can begin, so all (or nearly all) questions can be answered in a timely manner, even if some of those answers are not what people would like to hear. That being the case, the end point needs to be decided before the process begins, but the stops along the way also need to be clear. New funding, while always welcome, can bring its own problems if spent in unexpected ways (even if those are ultimately beneficial, such as new academic or support staff). While flexibility is key to ensuring that programmes and schools maintain their integrity and their pedagogic strength, that flexibility has to be built on a solid and rigid foundations. These have to be clear from the beginning and detail needs to be clearly rolled out to everyone at every available opportunity. No matter how good your communication, someone who needs to know the details won't and they need to be able to find out what is missing quickly and easily. If they have to hunt for the details of the strategy, they simply won't as they have other things to do and important steps can be missed. Often, hierarchy is a barrier in this process, and this was sometimes the case at the University of Leeds.

Conclusion

Curriculum reform and redesign is something which many universities are considering. By streamlining their processes they make their administrative systems more efficient, it makes their rules and regulations easier to understand and interpret and it allows universities to accurately 'sell' their programmes to prospective students. For schools and departments, it allows programmes to be redesigned, gaps in the curriculum to be identified and filled and for specific identities to be created for programmes by their content – specificity may reduce choice but it allows students to belong to a specific group, studying the same types of subjects, becoming specialists on graduation. It is not without its difficulties and hiccups, but it is ultimately a worthwhile and necessary part of an forward-looking university. Without it, change can be difficult to institute, certain modules or programme details can become engrained and entrenched without pedagogic reasoning and idiosyncratic elements can be retained for many years, negatively impacting on students.

While undertaking any reform it is vital to identity what is essential to keep and what must be fought for, while also recognising the elements of any programme of study which are unnecessary or of less importance. It is also vital to ensure key individuals are on top of the detail, know the rules inside out and give space for relevant questions to be asked regularly. Some individuals will engage enthusiastically with the project, some will not but will still participate. However, there will be a group who do not want to participate and will refuse to engage – sometimes actively and sometimes simply by passively avoiding any discussion. Those groups cannot be allowed to opt out of the project, even if their participation is only small-scale. If your strategy has been well-thought out, there should be no genuine pedagogic reason for disengagement (such as, for example, a change being counter to the needs of a relevant professional organisation). If there is good reason for disengagement,

this could be a fault in the strategy, but at the very least it will undermine the project unless it is handled carefully. For a curriculum redesign strategy to work effectively, everyone must participate to some degree – happily or not. By following these guidelines, large-scale reform can be instituted successfully in a large university.

Bibliography

Grabbil, Jeffrey, Gretter, Sarah and Skogsburg, Erik (2022) *Design for Change in Higher Education*, John Hopkins University Press.