

# Contexts for Curriculum Design : working with external pressures

## **Purpose**

This is one of a series of guides produced by the Imaginative Curriculum Network to stimulate thinking and promote good practice in curriculum design. This Guide focuses on the external pressures that curriculum designers have to work with. Part 1 provides a theoretical framework to understand the nature of the pressures on HE teachers. Part II focuses on the practical ways in which designers work with pressures.

## **Audience**

This Guide is written primarily for:

- ❑ people who have institutional responsibility for leading developments in teaching and learning;
- ❑ people who lead whole course curriculum design and/or who help other academics to develop the curriculum;
- ❑ people who help other academics to develop their knowledge and skills about curriculum design e.g. Tutors for PG Cert HE teaching and learning courses;
- ❑ LTSN Subject Centres who are growing disciplinary knowledge of practice.

The Guide is published as a working document which means that we will continue to shape it in response to user feedback. If you have comments or suggestions for improvement please forward them to [12Hmashaw@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:12Hmashaw@uclan.ac.uk)

attempting to influence higher education; goal posts are constantly being moved. Curriculum design cannot be a cosy self-contained activity between consenting colleagues. Continuous environmental scanning assumes enormous importance as does some ability to anticipate changes in the future - otherwise curriculum design can become a very frequent and perhaps tedious and reactive process of 'back to the drawing board'.

Contemporary curriculum designers need to be aware constantly of:

- ❑ a whole range of current pressures and influences and the impact that they have on their curriculum;
- ❑ newer, emerging agencies and pressures that may impact upon the curriculum in the future and that may be allowed for now, to some extent, by the development of flexible curriculum designs that can take care of questions such as 'what if.....?'
- ❑ the relative importance of the different pressures, where this allows some sort of prioritisation;
- ❑ a range of creative solutions in curriculum design that have the potential to respond effectively to multiple pressures - 'killing birds with one stone' eg. modularisation, personal development planning, self/peer assessment;
- ❑ the value of experimentation in curriculum design, but preferably in carefully identified and controlled research situations where potential risk can be minimised and damage (especially to students) limited;

## **Some Principles**

Curriculum designers are subject to many external pressures and events are not under the control of the curriculum design team: events unfold apace; there are myriad organisations and agencies

- sources of help/advice/guidance, information networks and the value of collaborative arrangements;
- the fact that it is no longer sufficient (if it ever was!) to be an expert in your discipline, more than ever it is necessary also to be an expert in education in general and, in particular, in the pedagogy of your subject - your profession is being professionalised!

### **Contextualisation and conceptualisation of pressures for change**

*Anyone who today advocates curriculum changes on purely philosophical grounds without considering the psychological and sociological factors...is simply irresponsible' (Hirst, 1974, p1)*

#### **Introduction**

In recent years external pressures have come to impact more and more on the many components and processes at all stages within the curriculum. These pressures influence and, to some extent circumscribe, the sorts of decisions that curriculum designers have traditionally been free to make for themselves. Curriculum design becomes a matter of responding to the 'requirements' of many external agencies whilst attempting to keep faith with the specific aspirations that the course team has for their students. Put another way, it is about identifying, impressing and maintaining a specific and unique 'brand image' for your course in the face of a set of external drivers that can appear to be trying to press all courses into the same mould.

This tension between external pressures and the aspirations of the course team is likely to have implications for all stages of the curriculum design and delivery processes. But it certainly

is something that must be carefully considered and discussed during the process of developing a course philosophy and rationale (a set of principles) that the course 'stands for' and that will guide the curriculum design. It is this beginning, usually collegiate, stage in the curriculum design process that we shall focus on primarily here.

The effects of the external pressures on other aspects of the curriculum (eg learning outcomes, teaching & learning strategy, assessment) will be carried through and discussed within the appropriate related topics.

#### **Mapping the terrain**

A survey of the literature suggests pressures, or influences, on the curriculum of very different sorts that, to a large extent, have been a permanent feature of education since its formal beginnings. Such influences might usefully be categorised (Hirst and Peters (1970) p13/14) under:

- epistemological - concerned with the nature of knowledge and the psychological underpinnings of learning and implying, for example, that scientific knowledge differs fundamentally from knowledge in the humanities and so they require different treatment within the educative processes;
- ideological - embracing a set of influences that are more to do with the values, beliefs, imperatives emerging from the adoption of different religious, political, social, economic, etc, frames of reference.

#### **Figure 1. The nature of pressures for change**

**epistemological (nature of knowledge)**  
 subject culture  
 content - driven  
 objectives - driven

process - driven  
truth vs utility  
content vs skills  
product vs process

**ideological**

faith orientated  
political  
economic  
occupational/vocational/professional  
humanist/liberal  
social/cultural

Some thirty years ago Hirst (1974) suggested that '*the crucially important questions of the curriculum are complex practical questions... anyone who today advocates curriculum changes on purely philosophical grounds without considering the psychological and sociological factors...is simply irresponsible*' p1

The current pressures that are asking questions of and impressing change upon our curricula appear indeed to be concerned with such issues (see figure 2) of a complex and practical nature. Whilst some of them do appear to reflect matters philosophical, the main focus appears to be driven by a range of epistemological, political, economic, vocational and social considerations.

**Figure 2 Contemporary Issues**

**cultural/epistemological**

nature of the subject and learning  
development of skills for life  
nature of the student

**political/economic**

accountability and efficiency  
wider and higher participation  
employability and vocationalism  
lifelong learning and CPD  
quality and standards  
global competition

**vocational**

professional bodies  
employers  
employability skills  
work-based learning

**humanist/social**

equal opportunities  
student equity/parity  
student centred curriculum  
student ownership of curriculum  
and individual needs

In the sort of 'free market' that exists in UK higher education and in the absence of any apparent explicit macro-strategic plan, we find many and diverse agencies, organisations, institutions, bodies and stakeholders (see figure 3 for your 'starter pack') expressing their views and theorising on each or, at least, many of these issues.

**Figure 3. Agencies and drivers**

- ❑ Quality Assurance Agency (codes and g/lines)
- ❑ Institutional mission
- ❑ Statutory, regulatory and professional bodies
- ❑ Subject benchmarking groups
- ❑ Generic and Subject LTSN's
- ❑ Learning and Skills Councils
- ❑ Regional Development Agencies
- ❑ Employers groups
- ❑ EU and Bologna, etc

Putting all this together, and making explicit some of the more obvious connections, we arrive at the sort of contextual and conceptual map indicated in figure 4. It is acknowledged that this might well be a significant over-simplification of a complex set of relationships. However we feel strongly that this is of value since it provides a holistic and structured overview that you can easily amend or augment for your more specialised applications. It also presents a useful overview/framework as the basis for a more pragmatic approach to the consideration of course philosophy and rationale by course teams.

Let us now begin to inspect the components of this structure and fill in some of the detail with a view to clarifying some of the inherent decisions that curriculum designers need to address.

### **The nature of pressures for change**

Ross (2000) gives an admirably succinct account of the development of the content driven curriculum of the university over centuries past. Originally the university curriculum was driven by the traditional classical humanist ideology with its concern for seven distinct disciplines: grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. These disciplines were transformed in mediaeval times into the more immediately recognisable disciplines of: languages, philosophy, theology, mathematics, physical sciences and social sciences.

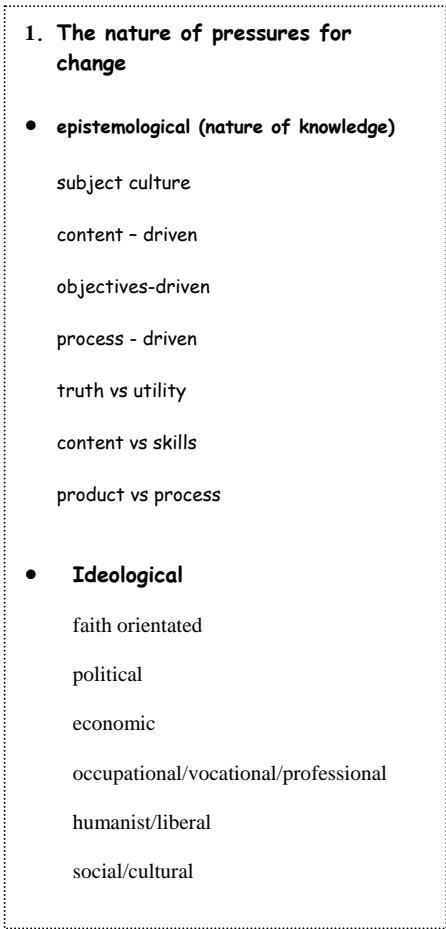
Hirst (1974) redefined these disciplines as: mathematics, physical sciences, human sciences, history, religion, literature and fine arts, philosophy. More importantly he distinguishes these seven different disciplines as each having its own distinct form of knowledge. So he suggests that each discipline has its own central set of knowledge concepts that are peculiar to it. Each discipline has its concepts related to each other through its own distinct logical structure. Each discipline generates statements/principles/hypotheses relating knowledge to real experience that are peculiar to the discipline. Finally each discipline has evolved its own distinctive set of techniques and skills for testing its statements. Thus the nature of knowledge (epistemology) differs considerably between the disciplines as do the means for creating new knowledge.

Alongside these more recent developments in defining the content driven classical curriculum, with a concern for theory and objectivity and for the establishment of truth (see Barnett (1990) for an extended discussion of objectivity, truth and the HE curriculum). Other schools and

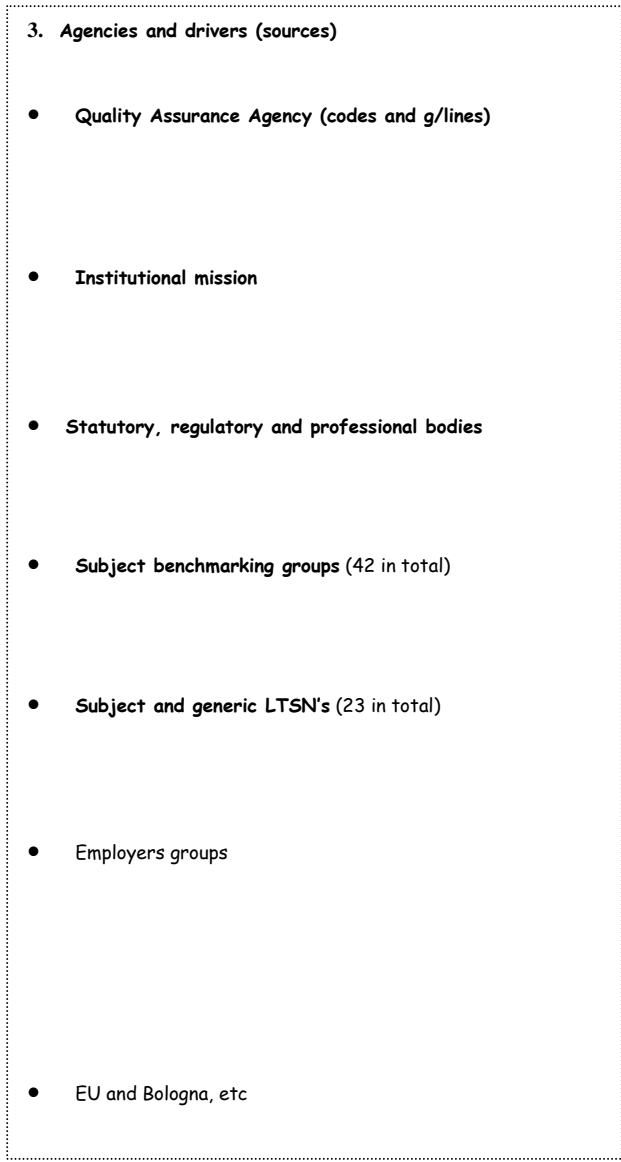
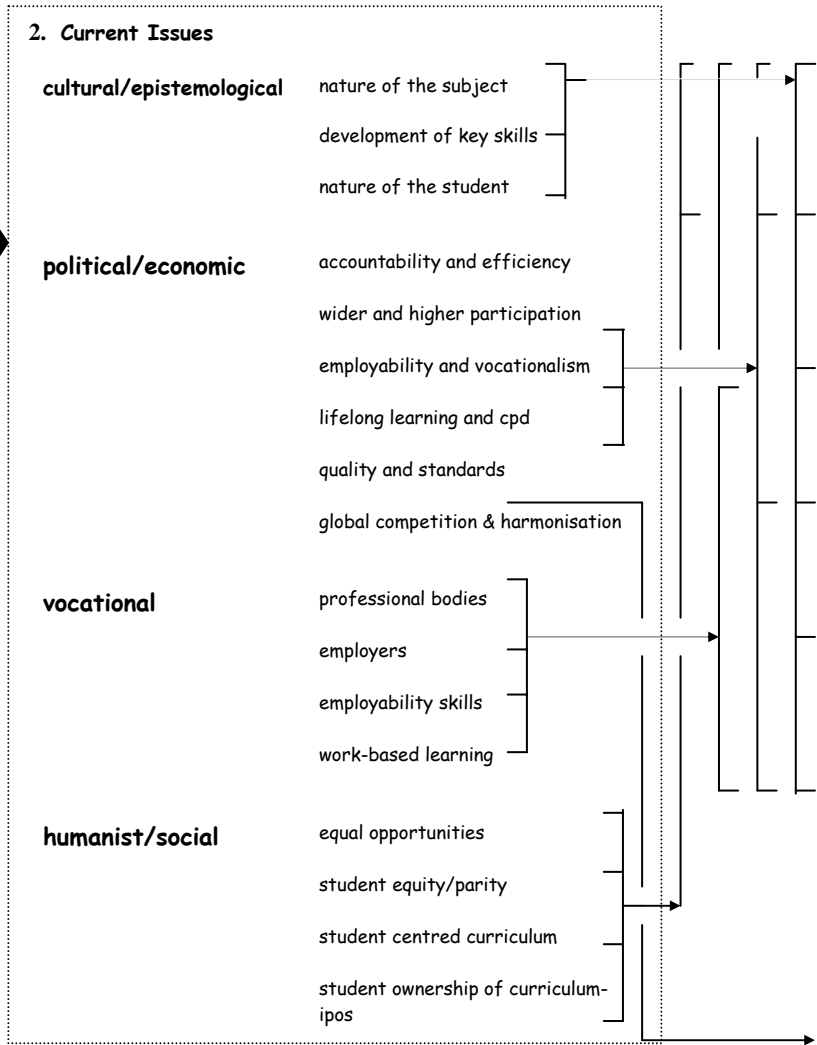
movements are promoting different perspectives and ideas in curriculum design. They are attempting to move the university curriculum away from its primary concern with elitism and 'high' culture towards more pragmatic and utilitarian concerns that are thought to be more appropriate for a mass culture.

These new movements are typified once again by Ross (2000) in his description of the emergence of the objectives-driven curriculum through the work of such proponents as Tyler in the 1940's and Bloom in the 1950's. Ross identifies this movement as utilitarian, technocratic and vocational in orientation. He then distinguishes a third and more recent movement that he refers to as being concerned with the progressive curriculum and that he sees as essentially operating through a process-driven curriculum. He traces this movement directly back to the work of Rousseau, with its concerns for a student centred curriculum with the teacher as a facilitator of individualised, self-directed learning by means of appropriately designed learning environments.

These movements/schools clearly illustrate the sorts of curriculum debates with which we continue to be engaged now: content vs process, process vs product, content vs skills, student-centred vs tutor-centred, individualised vs group.



*Figure 4*



**Selected references from:**

*Barnett (1990), Brent (1978), Blenkin et al (1992), Hirst (1974), Hirst & Peters (1970), Kelly (1980) Elliot (1998), Ross (2000), Bowden and Marton (1998)*

*(no websites located to date as at 20/5/02)*

**Selected references to:**

*Govt policy documents/websites  
QAA documents/websites  
LTSN documents/websites  
Professional bodies documents/websites  
Employers/perspectives (CBI,UCE,AGR, etc)*

**References to:**

*agencies indicated above*

It is tempting to see these various influences (content-driven, objectives - driven, process-driven) on the curriculum as purely philosophically inspired. However it must be suggested that they were and continue to be 'of their age'. Each was (is) a product of and derived within a particular view of a social order, a political perspective, an economic milieu, a religious doctrine, a cultural context. It is perhaps of some comfort to Hirst that it is difficult to conceive today of any curriculum change that could be inspired wholly by philosophical considerations and not be 'contaminated' by some social, political and/or economic considerations.

### **Current issues facing the curriculum designer**

Cultural (in a discipline sense) and epistemological issues continue to challenge us. The nature and distinctiveness of the subject remains paramount in the view of many teachers - witness the furore around the attempts by QAA to define a set of key/core skills that were common across all disciplines. A furore that caused QAA to invite 42 different subject areas each to identify the knowledge and skills within their area for themselves - which resulted 3 years later in 42 benchmark statements that clearly illustrate the extent of the commonality of key skills across all the subjects, [see QAA website at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutqaa/qaaintro/standards.htm#2>].

Perhaps prompted by this QAA experience the Learning and Teaching Support Network was set up by HEFCE comprising a Generic Centre, but with 23 Subject Centres associated with it, thus accommodating notions of core issues and distinct subject-based

issues.[see Itsn subject centres at: <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/index.asp?id=9>].

The progressive process-driven view of the curriculum is placing more emphasis on the individual needs of the student. Who is our student now? Who does our student want to/need to become? How do we best help our student to get there? Such questions require us to identify and know our students and graduates very well. Idealised models of student and of graduate become useful 'measures' with which to compare our students as we encourage their development.

[see examples in professional areas of the QAA benchmark statements at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/index.htm> and examples of professional body websites]. Learning styles and abilities, values, attitudes as well as knowledge and skills begin to form a critical part of such models and also of the curriculum.

Political and economic issues are forced even higher on our agenda for the curriculum. Resource constraints and the cries for 'accountability' but with maintenance of quality and standards (no dumbing down!) are driving the need for greater efficiency - doing more with less. The political agenda, around lifelong learning [see dfes website at: [http://www.dfes.gov.uk/a-z/LIFELONG\\_LEARNING\\_ba.html](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/a-z/LIFELONG_LEARNING_ba.html) and <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/>], employability, vocationalism and continuous professional development (cpd) is emphasising the development of key and transferable skills [see dfes website for Higher Education Quality and Employability at: <http://www.dfee.gov.uk/heqe/>] and thus promoting utilitarianism. Global competition [see Bologna Declaration at: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/socrates/erasmus/bologna.pdf>] in student recruitment (see The Observatory website at:

<http://www.obhe.ac.uk/resources.html>] can be driven by both economic (fees) and political (indoctrination) considerations as well as the often more overt social concerns.

The political drive for vocationalism and its perceived economic benefits is, as might be expected, strongly underwritten by employers [see the Association for Graduate recruiters at: <http://www.agr.org.uk/home.asp>] and related professional bodies [see examples of professional body websites]. All are eager to pronounce on their expectations of students and their requirements on the curricula of higher education, so key and transferable skills have acquired another more focussed label - that of employability skills [see HEQE website at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/heqe/>]. In these contexts work-based learning (wbl) [See HEQE website at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/heqe/wbl96rev.htm> and University for Industry website at: <http://www.ufild.co.uk/>] assumes significant currency, in particular as a vehicle for lifelong learning and cpd.

But what about the social and humanist tradition? Has it now virtually disappeared under this deluge of economic/political/vocational drivers? Well not entirely! Whilst one suspects that the economic and political arguments for wider and higher participation are pre-eminent, there is very little reluctance in harnessing also the obvious arguments around social equity, parity and equal opportunities, to support this case. Similarly notions of student autonomy and student ownership of the curriculum have the sort of ring that one might recognise in the more socially oriented/humanist traditions of the progressive curriculum. However the related strategies of independent learning, distance learning,

independent programmes of study, contractual learning, may be seen by some as quite convenient in a climate of teaching resource deprivation - setting students free or freeing the budget?

Within this milieu each university itself is trying to identify and proclaim its own special niche in the HE marketplace. It is attempting to identify precisely to all stakeholders what it stands for, what it has to offer, why it is special, why it should be the preferred choice and ultimately why it should survive. [ see web examples of Institutional missions]

All these issues should influence and can inform the decisions that any course team makes as it tries to create its own unique and persuasive identity, by developing its philosophy and rationale. Despite (or perhaps because of?) all this available data, experience suggests that the section dealing with 'philosophy and rationale' in many definitive course documents is underdeveloped and disappointing.

## Part II Practical considerations

The practicalities of the development of a course philosophy and rationale involve reaching some sort of agreement about the stance the course wishes to take in relation to some, if not all, of the sorts of pressures and issues contained within figure 4. Let's illustrate this by means of a set of questions that the course team might begin to consider in relation to their existing course:

- what are the main external pressures that you already recognise in your course?
- how do they manifest themselves and where do they impact most?
- what strategies have you employed in order to try to deal with these pressures?

- how well have the strategies worked?
- are there other curriculum design solutions that you might use to deal with the pressures?
- are there sources where might you find help with possible solutions eg professional bodies, LTSN subject centres, subject associations, networks within your institution, national networks and websites?
- are there additional pressures looming on the horizon that may affect your course in the next few years? are you scanning the external environment (eg networks/websites above) carefully to find out?
- is there some way to prioritise these pressures in order to ensure dealing with the most important/urgent?
- is it possible to identify sophisticated design solutions that satisfy multiple pressures and that are efficient to apply and implement?
- are these common pressures that are being tackled by other course teams and have you thought about some collaborative initiative to help gain new insights?
- in all these matters emerging from external pressures, what does the course team really believe in and is it possible to reconcile these beliefs, that will make your course unique (and marketable), with the 'demands' of the agencies and drivers that are bearing down on you?

This last is of course the big question when it comes to the feelings and aspiration within the course team- if the answer is 'no' you may end up with a course that nobody wants, whereas if the answer is 'yes' you may end up with a course that the team doesn't really want. Unpicking this notion about what the team stands for in a little more

detail would suggest a complementary (but important) discussion based around the following sorts of questions:

- what does your institution have to say about the sort of educational experience that it provides and the sort of student it recruits and produces?
- what epistemological position is appropriate in view of the disciplinary context of the course - what do the discipline oriented agencies and drivers (benchmark group, LTSN subject centre, professional body) say about knowledge in the discipline?
- is a content led, objectives led or process led approach to curriculum strategy most appropriate? or an appropriate mixture?
- how do you view the relative importance of content, skills, values, process, product, student-centredness, within your curriculum?
- do you have in mind a model of the student you will recruit and the graduate that you want your course to produce, and what attributes does such a graduate need to acquire through participating in your course?
- what sorts of political and economic issues do you want/need to take into account eg widening participation, vocational orientation, preparation for lifelong learning & cpd, the market place, standards and competitiveness?
- does your course have a strong vocational focus and to what extent should do you need to be influenced by the various stakeholders such as employers, professional bodies, etc?
- what sorts of social influences impact upon your course eg student personal aspirations, community expectations, student equity and parity, values and beliefs, collaborative learning?

Ultimately, the agreed answers to these questions should provide the course team with the basis for their own (unique) detailed, sound and rational set of principles that defines the stance that it will take in relation to the subject, the student, the learning process, role of the teacher, the community and the world of work. Such principles will then have to be reconciled with the external pressures in order to provide the basis for a set of broad aims for the course and subsequently its more detailed learning outcomes.

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