Curriculum change: designing for the future

JISC on AIR – Curriculum change: designing for the future

(music)

Kim:
The curriculum is the central pillar of any educational organisation – on one level it's an educational and pedagogic process, but it touches on all processes of administration and learning – whether it's the documentation of course papers and data, the allocation of funds and people, the timetable, student tutorials, quality assurance processes, assessment or course marketing – it is all encompassing. For universities, the challenge in this period of critical change is to deliver and design a curriculum for students that is relevant who are learning and working now and in the future.

(end music)

Kim:
Marianne Shepherd, researcher at JISC Infonet, one of JISC’s advisory services has been working with the Curriculum Design programme and sees this as a matter of urgency.

Marianne:
I would say just don’t under-estimate the competition, because students have got a much greater financial stake now in their education, and that need to ensure that they are making the right choices and approaching their learning in a much more customer orientated way, and undertaking the learning experiences which is going to bring them the best return on investment to be blunt about it I suppose, is something that institutions have to step up to, in terms of how they not only look at their course offering and making it relevant to the needs of learners, but also to wider economy and society et cetera. That essentially that they need to look at how those processes can make all that information transparent to prospective students, but also ensure that all the practices are in place to give students the learning experience which they’re investing in essentially.

Kim:
JISC’s programme to support universities in using technology to shape and deliver curriculum design has seen a number of approaches, but what’s emerged across the board is that whatever way you do it, it’s a major organisational change that needs to be managed effectively.
Marianne:
We’ve seen quite radical top-down approaches which have brought about quite significant change in a short space of time, and Manchester Metropolitan provides a great example of that, where change as I say is driven much more systematically from on high, to other projects have looked at developing practices and approaches much more organically, so it’s been about supporting staff, engaging staff in development activities, but from that sort of grassroots approach, and I think that’s where Birmingham City University gives a great example of that.
(FX Kim at Birmingham)

Kim:
Excuse me, can you direct me to the edge building cafe?

Emily:
Yep just go up these steps, do a left, follow the alcove round and the building should be in front of you with a sign on it saying ‘Edge Building’ go in there down the corridor and on your left.

Kim:
I’m at Birmingham City University. Emily Aldridge who is giving me directions is a new graduate who’s just heard she’s got a 2:1 in law. I asked her whether she had been assessed as part of the new curriculum design that’s in progress here.

Emily:
It didn’t have a direct affect on me but it affected the students the year below myself. The main change was, as opposed to we did eight set subjects in our first and second year – our final year was four subjects that we chose ourselves, whereas for them they do four subjects in their first year I think – that’s set, then second year they do two set subjects and they pick two, and their third year they do two set subjects and pick two. But for me, it’s better having the four that you pick in your third year because you take more credits from your third year, it’s a little bit easier if you’re doing subjects you enjoy.

Kim:
You weren’t envious of the people who had the different system then, you were happier?

Emily: I prefer our system to what they’ve got, I think it would be a little bit more stressful

Kim:
Although Emily has no personal experience, she thinks the new assessment would be more stressful,. In the process of designing the curriculum here, the various course
teams have had to do things that they hadn't done before. Sonia Hendy Isaac is senior Lecturer for Employer Engagement.

Sonia:
The key area for stress for most course teams was ensuring that they met the regulations, that they jumped through the hoops for the QAA, that they made sure that everything met the university standards, that they followed professional body standards, if that was applicable for their course, but of course the difficulty with jumping through all these hoops is that what you can do in jumping through lots of hoops is ignore the most important hoop, which is the student experience, and invariably the stress levels that were experienced by staff members trying to get through this process and feeling that they weren't necessarily empowered to be able to change the aspects because they were worried about whether or not that would fit regulations. So although it wasn't the only driver for redesign and changing the process of validation is one of the key aspects of our changing approach, and what it’s done is allowed staff members to feel that they’ve owned aspects of the design process, and also that the validation aspect of it, the regulatory requirements are still there because they need to be, but they are not the drivers, the driver is good course design.

Kim:
I was going to say, they still have to satisfy the professional bodies and the QAA, so what is it that makes it all so much less stressful than before?

Sonya:
Well we’ve actually constructed a thing called ‘The Rough Guide to Curriculum Design’ which is… The Rough Guide to Curriculum Design effectively gives them all the aspects that they are expected to explore, but it gives them all of these avenues for exploration in bite-size chunks, and supports them with a series of resources. We also have lots of academic advisors within the course design delivery team, who are there to ensure for example registry are present, for example there is a representation from the centre for excellence in learning and teaching, there is also a library and resources representative so all aspects are covered, and because we have the stakeholder approach, because each voice is equal, all of these people have input and are there to support good course design,

Kim:
Birmingham City University’s project is called T-Sparc which stands for Technology Supported processes for agile and responsive curriculum. Birmingham’s re-designing the curriculum through a “bottom up middle out” process – each course has brought together a team, which includes teaching and administrative staff, learners and employers… all key people to getting institutional buy in and identifying the technology required for successful curriculum design – engaging with the right stakeholders is crucial…
Sheila MacNeil is assistant director with JISC Cetis, one of JISC’s innovation support centres, and based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow.

Sheila:
Sometimes the people identified as key stakeholders aren’t actually the ones you really, really need to be speaking to in terms of institutional embedding and sustaining your developments. So, for example, I know that Birmingham City University there is quite a bit of work to be done in terms of integrating the systems that they’ve developed within wider corporate IT infrastructure and there are new systems coming on board that have a higher strategic priority at this point in time than the work that is being done in the project and that goes back to really knowing all your stakeholders.

Kim:
The T-sparc project here at Birmingham City is inherently transparent, so that you can identify problems in the process of curriculum design...Sonia Hendy Isaac.

Sonia:
The process of going middle-out or bottom-up is that the buy-in you get from staff, the buy-in you get from your academic teams, the buy-in that you get from students who are involved in the process, everything is very transparent, there is no cloak and dagger, there’s no discussions that don’t go on that aren’t incorporated in to the design process, so because of that transparency, I think that leads to a culture that is transparent, and empowers people to have opinion and to be able to discuss those openly, and to use those to inform their practice, which I think can only be a positive thing.

Kim:
This extended consultation to determine the shape, nature and requirements of the course before designing it have had long term benefits and here the use of digital film technology has been invaluable. Sheila MacNeil.

Sheila:
What they have done with their stakeholder engagement, particularly in the way that they have used videos is that they actually have a really strong understanding of their stakeholders and it’s done in a very authentic voice and that’s very very powerful in helping to develop strategic change because sometimes it’s difficult to actually change a document when you’re just looking at it but if you can talk about the wider issues you have with that or how you feel you engage with that process, I think having that anecdotal evidence, it’s really really rich evidence that they’re getting there, I think it’s incredibly powerful and it’s really useful to share with the rest of the sector as well as internally.
For Birmingham City, curriculum design is an ongoing process. The curriculum needs to be agile and the stakeholders able to shape it at any time.

Sonia:
What we’re attempting to do here is not only create courses that embrace an iterative design from the process of inception to validation, but that they continue to evolve, so that this is an ongoing evolution of course design and, once course teams embrace this iterative approach it becomes second nature, so rather than it being, as it is, in most academic environments, a course will be validated between one and five years and need to be continued to be revalidated, the majority of them are the latter of that end, so they could have the same course running for up to five years with a series of small modifications that would go on – possibly. With the iterative approach, what we hope to foster within our course teams is this notion of ongoing constant re-evaluation of the student experience of the course, and is the course still fit for purpose, and if it isn’t, to empower them to be able to continue to change that, and this is the key, and most exciting thing about this process, is that by having such high levels of ownership, what you invariably have are people who are empowered to continue to make their course offerings better and better.

Kim:
Birmingham City University is working at grass roots level to gain the confidence and the spirit of innovation amongst administrators and academic staff … directly north, in Manchester, it’s a different story...

(FX)

Kim:
Wow the new Manchester Metropolitan University building, which I think this is, is incredibly impressive, beautiful reflecting light, its almost neon. It looks like the sort of thing you would find in the heart of a financial district of a big city.
Hello.
I’ve come to meet Mark Stubbs, Professor and head of Learning and research technologies at Manchester Metropolitan University
I’m just admiring the new building… it’s a great symbol, perhaps of the way that MMU wants to be seen, the way MMU sees itself now.

Mark: I think that’s a really nice way to put it, we’ve been transforming the curriculum, we’ve been looking at creating new exciting learning spaces, we’re really looking to do something co-ordinated, so that we create an exciting virtual experience for the students and an exciting physical experience for the students through buildings like this.
As we walk into the building now, the feel of the business school is a bit like you know, Price Waterhouse or one of the banks, it’s really been designed to have that kind of feel, whereas
some of the other buildings we’re putting up in Art and Design have different learning spaces that are meant to create a different sort of feel, and encourage, in the case of the art and design building, sort of inter-disciplinary working and those kinds of things.

Kim: So really encouraging the students to set their sights high. Although 80% of them will end up working for SME’s probably.

Mark: I mean that’s interesting as well, if you look behind us there’s the employability hub and we really have created this as a space where we can bring together business and students and through the JISC project we’ve had some of the creative digital small medium size enterprises coming into the University, talking with students about what they’re looking for in terms of talent and the way they’d like students to be able to evidence that kind of skill, so really we want it to be a meeting place, a hub, where business and students mix and maybe we’ll learn one or two things from one another.

Kim: Manchester Metropolitan’s huge investment in new architecture came out of the recognition that here, as they say, ‘you can’t change anything, without changing everything’.

Mark: We were conscious that we weren’t perhaps as responsive in the way that we designed curriculum as we’d like to be, and that’s responsive towards our students but also responsive to the employability agenda., So four years ago when were successful in gaining the support and funding from the JISC, we had four pilot areas of the institution we were very keen to see how far we could push things in terms of creating and designing a responsive curriculum, and somewhere along the way our deputy vice chancellor for the student experience asked a very fundamental question – why are we only doing this in four areas? surely things like student experience, employability and making sure that our processes can design a responsive to those things, they should be core to what we do,

Kevin: The national league tables for universities in the UK are driven primarily by the National Student Survey.

Kim: Professor Kevin Bonnet who’s Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Experience at Manchester Metropolitan University took a business like decision. He realised the competition for students was stiff and in order to maintain student numbers, the offer and the experience had to be improved...
We have 78% satisfaction, but relative to others that’s not good, enough, we need to be, we need to have very happy students and we’re simply adrift of the sector norm, the sector norm’s about 82% and we’re 78, and that difference is enough to put us in a weak position. So I have to try and drive an improvement in those student perceptions, and in the real experiences that underpin those perceptions.

Mark:
We realised we would need to bring together a whole variety of people in order to pull that off, and we would need the full support of our academic colleagues and students to make it work.

Kim:
Mark Stubbs

Mark:
And so was born this initiative that goes by the acronym of EQAL, and stands for Enhancing the Quality of Assessment for Learning

Kim:
I mean, I wonder if you could briefly describe what’s new – what have you changed?

Mark:
In the space of twelve months we were able to collect and approve an entire undergraduate first year so every single module description, which is something like 800 modules, were re-written, approved, set up in a student record system, time-tabled, created in a new virtual learning environment, reading lists for those things were collected, and all of those aspects of the student’s learning experience were wrapped around the new first years using this new virtual learning environment moodle that we introduced at the same time,

Kevin:
We knew that elearning was becoming more and more important, that we wanted to enrich the curriculum by adding online learning resources, not to replace by distance learning but to supplement what we taught, but what we didn’t realise, that we were going to unleash a revolution in the way that students interacted with the university.

Kim:
Kevin Bonnett

Kevin:
Because this coincided with smart phones, and tablets and portable devices, and wireless being much more available, the martini concept of ‘any time, anywhere’ just became important. Now, that’s not just about being trendy and wired and all the rest of it, or unwired, it’s because a lot of our students actually travel and live in Bolton or Burnley or whereever it
is, and they have paid employment, they need to juggle their lives, they need to get information about the university and if possible access to their learning resources where they can and when they can. So it really was a case of build it and they'll come, as soon we started putting in these new moodle web facilities under a much stronger and more comprehensive student portal, they used it, by gosh they used it. And that’s made us think how do we extend that and how do we work with that.

**Kim:** and they’re not all able to use the internet or their PDAs are they…

**Kevin:** Well it was one thing that concerned me, I didn’t want to sort of create a new social divide, given that we do have a significant number of people from lower income backgrounds here, but again these things changed very fast, we found that 75% of the students coming in have smart phones and that’s probably gone up further now. We had a big debate about whether we should give every new student an ipad and the VC really wanted to do that. We didn’t. We’re working on the mobile strategy and it really moves very quickly, we need a very flexible mobile strategy, this year’s fashionable device is next year’s old hat you know, you have to be on android as well as mac and so on.

**Kim:** My feeling is that what you’ve done here is you’ve streamlined systems and brought about fairly radical changes to the system of assessment, but not concentrated too much on the content, which is what, certainly in schools, we mean by curriculum.

**Mark:** I think it’s fair to say that the notion of academic freedom and ownership for the curriculum is very much with the academics, not a sort of systems type issue. EQAL as a program, which as I said before was about enhancing the quality of assessment for learning, has always been pitched as a sort of two-fazed development, will sort out what you might term the e-admin, sort of remove the burden of some of the systems-type things in order that we can then genuinely engage with the academic heartland, the formative feedback and these kinds of things within the program, and as part of EQAL we created roles that we termed e-learning support officers, these are people who are located within the faculties. Their original role was to help people learn how to use moodle, so they showed academic colleagues how to drive the thing, but their sort of development role now really is going into the sort of areas that you’re talking about, sort of giving staff confidence and the competence to innovate the curriculum, the areas that they feel responsible for, make sure that you’re covering the right areas but also delivering it in exciting and innovative ways.

**Kim:**

Peter Bird, manager of JISC’s Supporting Responsive Curricula programme at Manchester, considers how a law student’s experience may be different now

Peter: I think the main change in an area like law is, we’re working much more closely with local employers and professional bodies, so now that when students join and do a law course
here, they’ll be getting lots of help with their employability from an early stage and be encouraged to do things like pro bono opportunities, they’ll be encouraged to go out and meet employers, they’ll be encouraged to keep portfolios of that experience, and that’s something that’s new in that department really. And because there’s a lot less time having to be spent on doing the curriculum design because a lot more of this has been placed online, then tutors will get a lot more time to spend with students, particularly in things like feedback, because that’s one of the criticisms that comes in quite a lot from students, that we don’t get good enough feedback, constructive enough feedback, helps us with our assignments, and enables us to develop as learners.

Kim:
So is one of the effects of streamlining these systems and creating new interconnected, well, joined up systems I think government would call it, that students can enjoy more face to face time with the academics who… that they want to hear from?
Peter: That’s right yeah, that’s the idea that tutors spend less time on administration because the old systems required an awful lot of typing and creating large word documents and going through very long approval processes. They’re having to spend much less time on that now, and tutors will get to spend more time with students.

Kim:
The use of technology to streamline the changes was crucial to keeping many staff on board. Such a perilous initiative could have gone seriously wrong – but the overriding sense that was communicated to everyone, was that it was a make or break situation.
David Shirley, is Director of Studies for the department of media and programme leader for acting.

David:
MMU has got 33,000 students and one of the big concerns would be to ensure that there is a kind of parity and transparency across the various compasses in which this university delivers its curriculum, and to do a sort of touchy feel gentle here whenever, it would have been chaotic, and also if you want students to move across different programmes and to have exchanges, there’s got to be some equality across the institution..

Kim:
Do you think that opportunities for reflection, particularly going back to the drawing board for the content of curriculum, might have been missed because of the speed of the implementation?

David:
I think initially, yes, I think that’s very possible because we had to go with speed and I do think a really thorough far reaching review takes longer than the EQAL program allowed for. That being said, it forced everybody into a review process which means people understand more
about how the review changes are implemented, and I think within art and design we’ve been very careful to point out to colleagues that they can come with modifications and changes further down the line.

Kim:
And for Kevin Bonnett, the idea of a longer, more consultative process, was out of the question for an institution this size. There was nothing to gain in waiting for even tougher times to arrive.

Kevin:
It just wouldn’t have happened at all, or we’d have had solutions that were really very cumbersome. For example there was a great big meeting agreeing what the student feedback on courses should look like, and the draft template included everything that everybody wanted from every course in the university, and the students would have been asked about 230 questions or something ludicrous, well it probably wasn’t that many but something quite ludicrous, whereas doing actual research we found that the predictors could go down to 6 questions, so we got a very slim, lean online-based questionnaire process, where the research done by people like Mark Stubs informs what we’ve done. Now again, that meant we were top-down in saying ‘well, you’ll do it this way, and not another way’, and not everybody likes that, of course not everybody likes that, but I think they’ll begin to see some benefits, it’s good for them really!

Kim:
If you would like more information about how JISC can help support your institution in Curriculum Design please contact…