

The Curriculum in Higher Education Research: a review of the research literature

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Abstract

The curriculum has been far less discussed in higher education than in school education. Indeed, analyses of the literature suggest that the curriculum has only really become a matter for sustained discussion and research in higher education in the present century. This article synthesizes the results of a review of the published research literature on the curriculum in higher education, outlining an agenda for future research.

Keywords: curriculum; higher education; higher education research; systematic review

Introduction

The curriculum has been far less discussed in higher education than it has been in school education. Indeed, analyses of the literature suggest that the curriculum has only really become a matter for sustained discussion and research in higher education in the present century. The purpose of this contribution is to synthesise that discussion and research.

Methodologically, the article makes use of the techniques of systematic review (Jesson, Matheson and Lacey 2011, Tight 2020, Torgerson 2003). Databases – Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science – were searched using keywords to identify potentially relevant articles and reports that had been published on the topic. Those identified were then downloaded and examined, and retained for further analysis if they proved to be relevant. The reference lists in these articles and reports were checked for other potentially relevant sources to follow up.

While research into the curriculum in higher education has only really blossomed in the last two decades (but see, for example, Donald 1986, Hewton 1979, Lowe 1969, Squires 1987, 1990, Toohey 1999 for earlier treatments), there is now a substantial and international literature. For example, a search on Scopus using the terms 'curriculum', 'higher' and 'education', carried out on 25/10/22, identified 29,078 articles (including books and book chapters) published in the English language with those words in their titles, abstracts or keywords, and 752 articles with those three words in their titles, which may be taken to indicate a likely focus on the topic of interest. A further search using the terms 'curriculum' and 'university' identified even more articles: 76,432 with the words in their titles, abstracts or keywords, and 2,325 with them in their titles alone. In this last search, 1,247 (54%) of the articles had been published since 2010, and 1,745 (75%) since 2000, illustrating the recency and growth of interest in the topic.

Given the focus on English language publications, it is no surprise that authors based in English-speaking countries, notably the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada, are the most prolific contributors to this literature (these four countries accounted for 42% of the 2,325 articles identified in the last search). However, the interest is genuinely global, with authors based in well over 100 countries and in all continents. Outside of the main English-speaking countries, researchers based in China, Germany, South Africa, Spain, Japan and the Netherlands all made significant contributions.

The interest in the topic is also spread across all disciplines and subjects within the academy, and split fairly evenly between authors from STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and HASS (humanities, arts and social sciences) disciplines. This draws attention to another characteristic of the literature, which is that – as with research into many topics in higher education – much of the published research is very

focused on and/or specific to a particular discipline, institution and/or course. The job of the reviewer and synthesizer, therefore, is to exemplify and cumulate these contributions, while giving particular attention to those of most significance and/or scale.

Meanings

Given this growing and diverse literature, it is important and necessary to begin this discussion of the curriculum in higher education research with a recognition of the varying and changing meanings that are given to the term. Thus, writing over 20 years ago, Bridges (2000) identified:

the competing epistemologies which are struggling to shape the formal undergraduate curriculum of the 21st century: the deconstruction of the subject, as reflected in, for example, the modularisation of the curriculum; the cross-curricular 'key' skills movement; the learning through experience movement and the shift of the seat of learning outside the academy; the profoundly disruptive potential of web-based learning. (p. 37)

These competing epistemologies are still active today, and have been joined by others. Nine years later, Barnett (2009) noted the challenges posed by engaging with different elements of the curriculum: 'Knowledge and skills are not redundant but they need to be augmented with dispositions and qualities, both of which – given principled curricula and pedagogies – may be enhanced through adept processes of knowing and understanding' (p. 440). The curriculum, in other words, was far more than a simple listing of the subject content that was to be covered.

Researchers have empirically identified different views of the curriculum held by contemporary academics. Through interviews with 20 academics in one Australian university, Roberts (2015) identified five different curriculum 'orientations': discipline-based, professional and academic, personal relevance, social relevance and reform, systems design. In a similar study, Phan, Lupton and Watters (2016) reported on the views of 39 senior administrators, academics and students in one Vietnamese university, noting that:

understandings of curriculum vary from one group to another within a single disciplinary department... the dominant understandings of curriculum revealed by this study are product focused, teacher focused and textbook driven. Some innovative ideas are expressed from the grassroots including teachers and students while most of the product-oriented and teacher-focused curriculum understandings come from senior administrators. (p. 1266)

Clearly, what most curriculum researchers would regard as rather outmoded views of the curriculum are still held by many in different countries and systems.

The contemporary pressures on higher education add to the difficulties in identifying, developing and agreeing on the curriculum. For Cliff et al (2020), 'In the unbundling, digitised, marketised curriculum space, there are multiple subjects, objects, outcomes, mediating artefacts, rules, communities and divisions of labour... It is this multiplicity which makes engagement with the curriculum (and how it is conceptualised) so dynamic and contested' (p. 14). This multiplicity is also apparent when the various stakeholders invested in the higher education curriculum – students, academics/faculty, higher education institutions, professional bodies, employers, governments – are recognized.

Krause (2020) casts doubt on the impacts of differential interpretations of the curriculum, particularly regarding its coherence:

Underpinning any work on curriculum scholarship is [sic] foundational questions about the shape and purpose of higher education and the definition and design of curricula. In addition to the question of which voice - or voices - carries the most weight in shaping the undergraduate curriculum, arguably the fundamental nature and definition of the curriculum and its organization is being called into question through the micro-credentialing and blockchain movement. Potentially, in this new world, students select from a buffet of nano-units and package these as best suits their needs, interests and resources, including time; while faculty become 'curators' of knowledge, and 'learning engineers' who organize learning objects and curriculum resources. (pp. 10-11)

Krause would seem to be arguing for more traditional and academic-led approaches to curriculum design.

O'Connor (2020) takes a more philosophical approach, contrasting the 'traditional', teacher-focused, instructive curriculum design with a student-focused, constructivist design:

the promotion of constructivist ideas in higher education raises some particular challenges for how curriculum and curriculum work are positioned and understood... [There are] two particular issues in relation to this: the positioning of curriculum knowledge as settled and easily transferrable across different structures and forms of teaching, and the potential for disciplinary differences to be overlooked. (pp. 9-10)

Given all of these continuing debates, it is not surprising, therefore, to find that the research literature on the curriculum in higher education is highly diverse.

Findings

It is no easy feat, of course, to synthesize the findings of a broad and diverse literature. The systematic review approach adopted led to the eventual identification of 149 highly relevant articles and books, which focused on a huge range of topics, and adopted a variety of methodological approaches. While the final selection inevitably involved some subjective judgement, note was taken of the scale and citation rates of studies, and, when there was doubt, their quality was discussed with informed colleagues.

The strategy taken here to reporting on their findings is to start with the most popular topics, and then move on to consider more briefly the broader range of specialist interests that is also evident. The five most popular topics for research were:

- curriculum development
- institution-wide curriculum change
- decolonization
- inclusion
- particular foci for the curriculum (employability, gender, internationalization and sustainability)

There are, of course, links and overlaps between these and other topics.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum development – or curriculum change, design or innovation – is the most generic concern or interest in the literature, and is at least implicit, but more usually explicit, in all of the studies examined.

An interesting feature of this literature is that many of the studies strike a negative tone, emphasizing the barriers or obstacles in the way of successful curriculum development. Thus, Hurlimann, March and Robins (2013) note that 'A key barrier to curriculum development was found to be the existence of cumbersome, inflexible and lengthy administrative processes' (p. 639), a sentiment that everyone who has worked in a higher education setting will surely recognize.

Posillico et al (2021) argue that 'there is a notable lack of connectivity among the studies conducted. This lack of a cohesive body of knowledge is exacerbated by the prevailing academic notion of 'individualism and self' vis-a-vis the 'collective team'... bespoke curriculum development occurs within an 'every person for themselves' mentality' (p. 1). Often, of course,

this occurs because the individual academic only has control over that part of the curriculum that they deliver themselves.

The increasing number of studies that have explored curriculum co-design or co-creation, in which students are engaged as partners in curriculum development, strike a more positive note. Bovill (2014) presents case studies of such projects in Ireland, the UK and the USA. She concludes that 'In the examples presented here, student participation has been reported to increase levels of individual and collective student responsibility for their learning, and enhance student performance and teachers' satisfaction' (pp. 23-24).

However, Tuhkala, Ekonoja and Hämäläinen (2021) come to more balanced conclusions on student voice in curriculum design. While noting that 'Previous studies have brought up various self-reported advantages of student involvement, such as improved perceived support, autonomy, engagement, and reflexivity', they also offer 'a novel understanding on what hindered student voice in curriculum design from students' perspectives: insufficient perceived expertise, negative expectations about project significance, negative attitudes towards student involvement, and lack of personal interest' (p. 459). These are much the same factors, of course that limit many academics' involvement in curriculum development.

Jansen (2004) examined the relation between curriculum organization and academic success, concluding that 'Aspects of curriculum organization that contributed positively to academic success were for example, decreasing the study load by spreading exams and programming fewer parallel courses, whereas it was better not to spread re-tests over the whole year' (p. 411). Clearly, relatively small changes to the curriculum, particularly related to workload, can have significant effects for both students and staff.

Other studies have provided guidance on the analysis and improvement of the curriculum, including the use of curriculum analytics (Dawson and Hubball 2014), evaluation (Spiel, Schober and Reimann 2006), mapping (Arafeh 2016) and sequencing (O'Neill, Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2014). Some ambitious studies have been international in scope, including the study by Frank et al (2000) of history curricula in 89 countries between 1895-1994, and Gilder's studies of curriculum reform in four developed countries (2011a) and in less developed countries (2011b).

Shay (2011) also takes a historical approach, using the work of Bernstein and Maton, in considering the formation of the undergraduate history curriculum at the University of Cape Town. Two separate periods of curriculum formation are identified, treating history as canon and history as social science, and revealing 'the privileging of different kinds of historical educational knowledge, as well as the promotion of different student identities' (p. 315).

By 2013 Shay was discussing curriculum differentiation, stressing the differences between occupationally oriented, professionally oriented and general-formative curricula in higher education. She concluded that 'there are more and less powerful forms of knowledge and whether our curricula give students access to these will determine whether they are part of society's important conversations' (p. 580). This was later conceptualized in the idea of epistemic access (Shay 2014).

Institution-Wide Curriculum Change

Institution-wide curriculum change may be seen as a scaled-up form of curriculum development, designed to impact the whole of a college or university. Curriculum change may be scaled-up even further to national or even international level, as discussed in the sub-section on decolonization.

As with curriculum development in general, a lot of the discussion in the literature has been focused on what factors help or hinder institution-wide curriculum change. Thus, Anakin et al (2018) identified 'six forces acting to enable and/or inhibit curriculum change – ownership, resources, identity, leadership, students, and quality-assurance – with a range of associated factors' (p. 216).

Bajada, Kandlbinder and Trayler (2019) offer a general framework for cultivating innovations in higher education curricula. Factors such as leadership, management, senior executive support, staff goodwill, and their values and norms (a list with similarities to that given by Anakin et al 2018), help to determine the institutional capacity for innovation, while external factors such as legal regulatory requirements, external stakeholders and professional membership requirements determine the institutional environment.

In an analysis of curriculum change taking place successively at departmental and institutional level in a Finnish research university, Annala et al (2021) identify:

six forms of agency. Progressive, oppositional, territorial, bridge-building, and accommodating agency appeared in both contexts. Powerless agency was identified in only the university-wide curriculum change. Individual, community, and institutional structures enabled or impeded agency. Instead of focusing on the micro or macro levels exclusively, this study highlights the interwovenness of structural-agentic processes, including the critical role of social cultures and relationships, and reveal [sic] how academic freedom is used in many ways as room for manoeuvring in curriculum changes. (p. 1)

Woelert, Vidovich and O'Donoghue (2022) focus on the agency of universities to undertake radical curriculum change, using data collected from two Australian research-intensive universities. They conclude that:

universities operating in the same national but different local contexts can exercise agency over their change processes and successfully achieve radical change despite broadly isomorphic national conditions. In each instance, such change was premised upon effective combination of adoption and creation of policy elements in a way that evaded the clear-cut distinction between 'passive' policy borrowing and more 'active' policy learning. (p. 16)

Institution-wide curriculum change, or at least oversight through quality assurance, is increasingly common. The debates about the appropriate balance between top-down and bottom-up initiatives, and about the scope for individuals, groups and departments to develop and maintain particular approaches, are not going to go away.

Decolonization

Decolonization of the higher education curriculum has become of growing importance in recent years. This has been particularly evident in the context of South Africa in the post-apartheid era, but has a much longer history (Author forthcoming):

Content matters, in particular when a European-centred curriculum continues to dominate and define what counts as worthwhile knowledge and legitimate authority in South African texts and teaching; it matters in the context of the inherited curriculum, informed by apartheid and colonialism, in which only the more readily observable, offensive racism has been skimmed off the top. (Naidoo et al 2020, p. 974)

Indeed, in contrast to the departmental or institution-wide curriculum development initiatives already referred to, this can be seen as a national initiative (e.g. Asea 2022, Higgs 2016, Moore 2003, Shay 2015, 2016, Shay, Wolff and Clarence-Fincham 2016, Zawada 2020).

However, interest in decolonizing the curriculum is global. Most parts of the world have, after all, been colonized, and many still are, so there is plenty of scope for removing or amending curricula implemented by colonial powers. Shahjahan et al (2021) provide a critical review of 207 articles published worldwide, identifying variations in the meanings, actualization and challenges of what they term 'decolonizing pedagogy and curriculum' or DCP:

While decolonization meant recognizing constraints, disrupting, and/or accommodating alternatives, how the latter manifested varied depending on context. Furthermore, actualizing DCP took four forms: (a) probing the positionality of knowledge, (b) constructing an inclusive curriculum, (c) relational teaching and learning, or (d) bridging higher education institutions with community and/or sociopolitical movements. Yet we found that these manifestations were nuanced across geography, discipline, and stakeholders. Finally, we observed some common challenges, ranging from student resistance, to systematic/structural barriers, to the complexities forging relationships between decolonizing practices and the local/Indigenous communities. (pp. 27-28)

These challenges are only exacerbated, of course, by the increasing internationalization of higher education and the multi-cultural nature of many societies. There are clear links here to the next topic, inclusion.

Inclusion

Efforts to decolonize the curriculum can be seen as one expression of broader attempts to make it as inclusive as possible to all who might wish to benefit from and be involved in it. There are also clear links here to concerns with social inequality and widening participation, as well as with exposing and removing what has long been referred to as the hidden curriculum.

Most studies are, again, small-scale, typically confined to a single institution, and focus on attempts to make the curriculum more inclusive and/or on the continuing problems in doing so (e.g. Dracup, Austin and King 2020, Kennedy et al 2021, Webb et al 2021, Yob et al 2016). They also tend to focus on particular groups within society, such as ethnic minorities, indigenous students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the 'disabled'.

The argument is that, because the higher education curriculum has been historically fashioned for bright, mainstream school-leavers – what Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars and Dingwall (2021) term the 'implied' student – it needs significant adaptation or alteration to be accessible to and meet the needs of different types of students. This has to go beyond the provision of supplemental instruction, or the 'deficit' model of provision, to recognizing and transforming the hidden curriculum.

There is an assumption here, of course, that a transformed curriculum that works equally well for everyone concerned is a possibility. This is a belief

that underlies the universal design for learning approach (e.g. Fornauf and Erickson 2020, Griful-Freixenet et al 2017).

According to Semper and Blasco (2018), the problem is more ingrained than just a hidden curriculum, requiring a complete change in the way that academics see themselves as higher education teachers, and in how they interact with their students. They argue that:

The problem of the HC [hidden curriculum] has not been solved by the transition from a teacher-centered education to a student-centered educational model that takes the student's experience as the starting point of learning... HC can be made explicit in HE [higher education] when the teacher recognizes and lives his/her teaching as a personal issue, not merely a technical one; and that the students' experience of the learning process is not merely individual but emerges through their interpersonal relationship with the teacher. (p. 481)

In higher education, however, not all teachers (or students) want to develop interpersonal relationships with all of their students.

Particular Foci for the Curriculum

Many of the studies identified by this review examine particular foci for the curriculum, with the most popular being employability, gender, internationalization and sustainability (decolonization, the subject of a previous sub-section, could also, of course, be thought of in this way).

Employability

Pereira, Vilas-Boas and Rebelo (2020) report on a large-scale survey of key stakeholders (students, employers and academics) in five European countries. They found that the most popular measure identified by stakeholders for developing employability was the internship: 'internships are considered of great importance to increase graduates' employability as well as being the best means of cooperation between universities and companies' (p. 321).

Internships are, of course, known by other names as well – practicum, work experience, secondment, etc. – and are mandatory on many professional programmes. A key issue, then, is how to mimic these experiences for students on other kinds of degree programmes. Riu et al (2020) offer a methodology for assessing university curricula in terms of the usefulness of the skills they develop in students for the workplace.

Gender

Verge (2021) looks at the work of feminist academics in the regions of Catalonia and Valencia in Spain, who have used quality assurance frameworks strategically to help re-gender the curriculum:

From a feminist perspective, quality assurance has been criticized for the introduction of neoliberal, competitive, and marketization dynamics in universities... Indeed, gender equality concerns have played no role in the establishment of quality assurance conceptual frameworks... quality assurance can be used strategically... enabling the introduction of procedures that inquire and may stimulate change on gender inequalities. (p. 202)

Based on an inter-disciplinary study carried out in one UK university, Hinton-Smith et al (2021), however, offer the cautionary advice that 'responsibility for incorporating gender and wider aspects of identity more inclusively in university teaching cannot be attributed to any one space or group' (p. 13). As with most curriculum change, if it is left to committed activists, only marginal improvements are to be expected.

Internationalization

Internationalization of the curriculum has been a regular focus of research in different countries (e.g. Clifford and Montgomery 2017, Huang 2006, Nguyen, Phan and Tran 2021, Ohajionu 2021, Renfors 2019, Sawir 2013).

Aktas et al (2017) provide a study of 24 institutions in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States that offer global citizenship programmes. They interrogate institutional website data using critical discourse analysis, finding that the programmes are highly variable in terms of length and focus. However, 'common to all the programs was the notion that global citizenship is not only something that could be learned but also something that has to be earned' (p. 77).

Zapp and Lerch (2020) also offer a cross-national study, drawing on the World Higher Education Database to examine '442,283 study programs from 17,129 universities in 183 countries' (p. 372). They:

argue that university knowledge shapes globalization by producing various sociopolitical conceptions beyond the nation-state... Three variants stand out, which vary across disciplines: an interstate model (prevalent in business and political science), a regional model (in political science and law), and a global model (in development studies and natural sciences)... internationalized curricula are more likely in business schools, in universities with international offices, in those with a large number of social science offerings, and in those with membership in international university associations. (ibid)

As Zapp and Lerch suggest, universities and colleges are not only affected by internationalization but are also key drivers of it.

Sustainability

Interest in the inclusion of sustainability within the higher education curriculum has grown substantially in recent years. Weiss, Barth and von Wehrden (2021) provide a meta-analysis of 131 international case studies, enabling the identification of:

six distinct implementation patterns: (1) collaborative paradigm change, (2) bottom-up, evolving institutional change, (3) top-down, mandated institutional change, (4) externally driven initiatives, (5) isolated initiatives, and (6) limited institutional change... To achieve more comprehensive ESD [education for sustainable development] implementation, open communication among all stakeholders should be facilitated and feedback as well as reflection encouraged... Collaboration between isolated ESD initiatives and various stakeholders leads to shared knowledge and resources. Strong informal collaboration and communication can compensate for a lack of formalized leadership support from the top. (p. 1579)

These are all, of course, fairly generic suggestions that may be applied to other areas of curriculum development as well.

Tassone et al (2018) reflect upon the lessons learnt from a European project, advocating the adoption of a responsible research and innovation approach to embedding sustainability in the higher education curriculum. Caniglia et al (2018) suggest a transnational or glocal – i.e. global and local simultaneously - approach to embodying sustainability competences in the curriculum.

Less Researched Topics

Many other foci for the curriculum in higher education have also been the subject of research, but not to the same extent as those discussed. These less popular (at least as yet) foci include, for example: academic literacies (Murray and Nallaya 2016), creativity (Donnelly 2004), critical pedagogy (Lambert, Parker and Neary 2007), deconstruction (McGregor and Park 2019), ecology (Wang 2014), the first-year curriculum (Ulriksen, Holmegaard and Madsen 2017), inquiry-based learning (Justice et al 2009), interdisciplinarity (Millar 2016), learning outcomes (Soares, Carvalho and Dias 2020), life-wide learning (Jackson 2010), massification (Huang 2017), posthumanism (Siddiqui 2016), ways of thinking (Barradell, Barrie and Peseta 2018), wellbeing (Upsher et al 2022), wicked problems (Veltman, van Keulen and Voogt 2021) and work-integrated learning (Jackson 2010).

Discussion and Conclusions

This review of the research literature on the curriculum in higher education has revealed a diverse and extensive global interest in the topic. While much of the literature – as on other topics in higher education (Tight 2019) – concerns small-scale and focused initiatives, there are also some larger-scale, international and comparative studies. While there is considerable emphasis on the problems or barriers to curriculum development and innovation, and often critical assessment of top-down initiatives, there are also continuing calls to transform the curriculum to improve access and inclusion. For example:

A transformative approach demands a 'reframing' of the curriculum. This involves adjusting the scale of the problem, interrogating assumptions informing the norms of the curriculum, questioning current boundaries between 'mainstream' and 'other' students and reviewing the fitness of the curriculum for a pluralist society. (Lockett and Shay 2020, p. 50)

While it would be naïve, with all of the pressures on higher education and its varied funders and stakeholders, to expect widespread curriculum transformation, we have to maintain a positive outlook. In this context, it is also critical that the research interest in the higher education curriculum is developed further. In particular, there is a need for more larger-scale and comparative research to assess the state of the curriculum and curricular change across disciplines, institutions and systems.

The curriculum in higher education – and hence research into it - is now seen as a much more important topic than it was 20 or 30 years ago. It links the details of course design with the student experience of entering, moving through and transitioning beyond higher education. It offers a broader, and potentially more integrated, perspective on the teaching/learning function of higher education.

Two other conclusions may be put forward on the basis of this review.

First, while the majority of the literature examined (the main exception here is the literature focusing on decolonization) argues for curriculum change or development by adding to the curriculum – e.g. more inclusive material, activities designed to enhance employability or sustainability – little attention has been given to what should be removed. Yet, the curriculum is effectively a zero-sum game; there is only space for so much material and activity. So, logically, anyone proposing curricular additions should also be identifying what can safely be omitted; bearing in mind, of course, the expectations of professional and validating bodies, and, doubtless, their colleagues' opinions.

Second, while the student voice is a motivating factor for some of the literature reviewed (notably, again, that on decolonization), co-creating the

curriculum is a focus for a minority of researchers, and student-centred learning is a more generally accepted aim, there is still a widespread sense here that the curriculum is primarily the responsibility of higher education teachers, guided by their institutions and relevant professional bodies. While accepting that lecturers and professors will be the major driving force for implementing curriculum development, much more needs to be done to research what students would prefer and benefit from.

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