

Embedding student and employer engagement in curriculum innovation: a collaborative project (0094)

Wintrup Julie¹, ¹*University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom*

Abstract

A whole-system approach to curriculum innovation is taking place at the University of Southampton with the goal of broadening the range of modules available to students who wish to exercise greater choice. To create the conditions necessary for flexibility, existing modules will in time conform to a standard European Credit Transfer Scheme size and new trans-disciplinary provision will be developed to attract students from a range of backgrounds and disciplines. This paper examines the progress to date of a student-initiated development in Global Health, which involves a network of practitioners, academics and researchers. The challenges of bringing this development into the mainstream programme of curriculum development activities – a necessarily bureaucratic and committee-driven process - while retaining and respecting the exceptionally high commitment and very specific goals of the students and practitioners, is discussed and located within the literature on student engagement. Presenters will include students and others from the project.

Curriculum reform and innovation is taking place in several universities world-wide and in the UK (including Melbourne, Hong Kong, Aberdeen). The need for students to develop a broader world-view, by understanding precepts from science, arts and humanities, is often cited as the reason for change (University of Aberdeen, 2008). Narrow discipline-based programmes are no longer seen to equip graduates for societal problems which require a cross-disciplinary approach or for changing career and employment trends. At Southampton, this reform is taking place through a review of all systems linked to curriculum, so that students entering in 2012 will be able to learn about their programme and new options, plan and select from an extended virtual menu, tailor their learning and work with people they would not otherwise meet. Such opportunities already exist in many universities, from elite institutions to those characterised by open and distance approaches, most importantly the Open University. However the growth of vocational programmes in HE means that many students study a prescribed route, embedded in a particular world-view, with little scope to experience alternative approaches or debate with peers and academics from different disciplines. This paper looks at the development of a project initiated by students in a highly vocational sector – medicine – and considers the issues of working with students on curriculum reform for the university. The opportunities for a radical rethink of curriculum development are discussed in light of the student engagement literature.

For some years, health practitioners from branches of medicine, midwifery and health sciences based in Southampton University Hospital Trust (SUHT) have taught and practised aspects of global health, many taking time out to work in developing countries to support new practice and teach skills. A short walk along University Road, a team of academics and researchers based at the Centre for Global Health, Population, Poverty and Policy (GHP3), lead the world in aspects of research into the complex and interrelated environmental, political, social and economic factors affecting the health of the world's most disadvantaged communities. A determination to work more closely was cemented through the efforts of a group of medical students, who initiated a 'Global Health Education Network' (GHEN), the inaugural meeting of which was held one evening in a small room of

Southampton General Hospital in October of last year (attracting almost thirty people). One of the network objectives is to influence the curriculum of health and social work programmes, which members feel ought to address global health more explicitly. Another is to enable greater scope for work placements abroad; medical, midwifery and some allied health students are able to access such placements although many hurdles exist and students need to be persistent. Underpinning the global health initiative is a clear moral standpoint; as citizens of the world, we have a duty to understand the global challenges ahead.

The emerging goals of curriculum reform include innovative pedagogy which builds upon student experience, is value-based and research-informed (University of Southampton Curriculum Innovation Programme, 2010). Student engagement is a key driver, presently manifested through representation (Southampton University Students' Union or SUSU) and the involvement of a dedicated curriculum innovation 'student reference group'. However there is always the risk that such aspirations become viewed as rhetoric, or marketing ploys, particularly in the current economic climate. This initiative presented an opportunity to put the goals of innovation 'to the test', by asking of the senior team: 'how can curriculum reform support this cross-university, inter-disciplinary, student and practitioner-initiated project?'

By viewing curriculum innovation as a vehicle for change in a real and immediate sense, both opportunities and risks present themselves: the student network, GHEN, already formed and with a life of its own, has expectations not constrained by university timescales and processes; straightforward answers are sought to questions which have not yet been broached within the curriculum innovation team; members of the project team find pragmatic solutions and make decisions which will influence future university-wide developments. Many aspects of change in HE could be examined through this project, but this paper is concerned with the high level of engagement and motivation of the student group. As strategic learners, they have been thoughtful in their use of time, dealings with colleagues perceptively and positioning global health as a university interest (Entwhistle, 2000). When considered through the theoretical perspective of student engagement, they can currently be seen to be in a virtuous cycle; their sense of self as students is integrated with their sense of becoming future (good) doctors and positive role models from practice are colleagues in the project (Leget, 2004). The cultures with which they come into contact – in their own school, the NHS, amongst academics and researchers interested in global health and curriculum innovation team members – lend themselves to collegiality and collaboration, supporting a healthy integration of the social and the academic (Tinto, 2006). Often the student group is referred to as 'unusual' or even 'exceptional', the implication being that generalisations cannot be made to the larger student body.

There is no denying their commitment: while acknowledging their efforts will have little or no impact upon their own education, during the past twelve or so months students have individually and collectively attended meetings of senior academics and professional staff (including the Vice Chancellor and Pro Vice Chancellor), carried out follow-up work, circulated information to a large network, carried out surveys of student opinion on global health education, attended related conferences outside of their formal programme, met with their own Education Director, organised seminars for medical students and hosted / led GHEN meetings of senior clinicians and academics. However, like all students, they struggle with placements, deadlines and a lack of knowledge of university procedures and norms. It is the contention of this paper that we have every bit as much to

learn about the complex and inter-related dynamics between ourselves as academics and highly engaged students, as we do from research which focuses upon attrition and its causes.

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