Student views of curriculum and their roles in curriculum

Short Research Briefing

Curriculum Transformation Programme Board 22nd June 2022

**Introduction**

The research literature that examines curriculum conceptualisations reports on staff perceptions of curriculum (see for example Fraser & Bosanquet’s important 2006 study from Australian academics), but there is a lack of research which examines students’ views of curriculum. In response to this, a research team comprising 2 staff and 2 students from UoE carried out research to investigate UoE students’ definitions of curriculum, and their perceived roles in the curriculum.

**Methods**

We created a short, 10-question online questionnaire (5 demographic questions and 5 curriculum focused questions), which we distributed to students between May-July 2021 via student newsletters, through Edinburgh University Students’ Association mailings, and to students attending the 2021 UoE Learning & Teaching Conference. This resulted in 157 responses. The responses came from students in all Colleges and most Schools, from all years of study (UG, PGT and PGR), and from students covering all funding categorisations (Scottish, RUK, EU, International).

**Findings**

We asked students ‘What does the word curriculum mean to you? (Please don’t look it up on Google, we are interested in what it means to you currently even if you are not sure)’. Students defined curriculum in a range of ways, with the greatest number viewing curriculum as synonymous with content and concepts, followed by emphasis on curriculum as structure and outline or learning outcomes and skills, the final theme within responses was the idea of curriculum as an educational offering. Some students defined curriculum in ways that fit more than one category.

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| --- | --- |
| Content and concepts | 77 |
| Structure and outline | 38 |
| Learning outcomes and skills | 33 |
| Educational offering | 22 |
| Other | 10 |

Only 36 students mentioned learning within their definition of curriculum and only 29 referred to teaching. 12 students mentioned both learning and teaching. Many students used the word study to refer to their role to learn elements of the curriculum. Interestingly only 24 students spoke about curriculum in the first person, with a number of comments indicating that curriculum was something ‘done to’ students. A small group of students did not know what curriculum meant, with some stating they didn’t know and others guessing it was related to a CV.

We asked students what they considered their role to be in relation to the curriculum. Responses were categorised in relation to their level of activity.

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| **Level of activity** | **No of responses** | **Sample quote** |
| Active | 60 | ‘To learn and understand the material in the curriculum’ (UG, 3rd yr, EU) |
| Passive/active | 27 | ‘I think I’m supposed to engage with it’ (UG, 2nd yr, International) |
| Passive | 20 | ‘Something students have to accept and live with’ (UG, 4th yr, EU) |
| Proactive | 5 | ‘I am responsible for my own education. I am proactive in studying…and going above and beyond to have the knowledge required for professional practice’ (PGR, RUK) |
| Unsure | 5 | ‘I don’t know what you mean by this’ (UG, 5th yr, EU) |
| No role | 4 | ‘I feel that I play no role in the curriculum of my school’ (UG, 4th yr, Scottish) |
| Blank | 8 |  |

We asked students about their current level of influence on the curriculum. The summary of responses can be found in Figure 1.

The four main areas of influence students reported were in relation to 1) Direction of study; 2) Choice of institution/courses; 3) Course content and teaching approach; 4) Personal engagement and effort. There was also a recurring theme that students have the opportunity to feedback on courses and programmes, but this was often coupled with comments that staff often do not listen to or act on this feedback.

There were vast differences in the level of agency students experienced in relation to the curriculum. The following quotes illustrate this:

‘I have no influence on my learning experience’. (UG, 2nd yr, RUK)

‘In a broad sense, I am aware that my behaviour has a large impact on my learning experience…I can actually alter my own personal curriculum in the sense that I can broaden out the scope that is usually given to me’. (UG, 3rd yr, RUK)

**What we learned**

* The emphasis on content and structure within students’ definitions of curriculum echo staff definitions in Fraser & Bosanquet’s (2006) study. Both students and staff highlighted more interactive versions of curriculum involving greater student agency, but less often than they mentioned content and structure.
* For many students, the curriculum is impersonal.
* Some students had negative emotional reactions to the curriculum, with the curriculum described for example, as ‘a bumpy road’, or ‘fraught’.
* Feedback on courses was described as a common form of agency, but too frequently, students reported that the feedback loop was not closed. They either described no action being taken, or they were unaware if action was taken in response to their feedback.

**Questions and reflections for Curriculum Transformation Programme Board members**

* How do we build knowledge of the curriculum? Where do we create opportunities for conversations between staff and students about what curriculum is? Do we have a clear and shared vision of what the curriculum is that is being transformed?
* What are the potential implications of unequal knowledge of, and engagement with the curriculum for curriculum decolonisation efforts?
* Curriculum focusing predominantly or solely on content knowledge has been widely criticised (see Barnett & Coate, 2005; Bron et al, 2022; Flinders & Thornton, 2013). How do we ensure we are led by a vision of curriculum as an interactive process, balancing student development of knowing, acting and being (Barnett & Coate, 2005).
* How do we build opportunities for greater student agency in relation to the curriculum?
* Where in the current curriculum transformation work are we ensuring the curriculum will be more personal for students?
* We have a pressing need to ensure we respond to feedback from students and ensure that students know that we have acted on their feedback (or why not, if this isn’t possible).

**References**

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