Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching: Frameworks and Practice

The Open University, 6th April 2017

SESSION 4: Open Discussion on 'The Development of Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Curriculum', Chaired by Dr Payam Rezaie, The Open University [s*ee also 'Supporting inter- and multi-disciplinary teaching and learning at taught postgraduate level*' by Dr Payam Rezaie and Jay Rixon, The Open University; Session 2: Postgraduate Curriculum]

Reading links and papers shared:

- Lyall, C., Meagher L., Bandola, J., Kettle, A. (2015) 'Interdisciplinary provision in higher education: current and future challenges', Higher Education Academy. Available online.
- Gangtogtokh, O. and Quinlan, K.M. (2017) 'Challenges of designing interdisciplinary postgraduate curricula: case studies of interdisciplinary master's programmes at a research-intensive UK university', Teaching in Higher Education (online) Available online.

- www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/lyall_hea_belfast_keynote.pdf
- www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.646032!/file/Catherine_Lyall.pdf
- www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.646243!/file/Orkhon_Gantogtokh.pdf
- kar.kent.ac.uk/60164/

NOTES FROM THE SESSION

- What are the benefits and challenges of developing interdisciplinary postgraduate curriculum?
- See reading papers and related links above, referred to during the session.
- Coherence building. Institutional/organisational/student-focused. Collaborating, networking and connections made; bringing people from different disciplines and different backgrounds together, working in multidisciplinary teams; focused teams that talk to each other; being able to understand, view specific issues from different disciplines, with different perspectives, and bring to bear (apply learning) to develop solutions to problems.
- A different way of thinking and applying critical thinking in an inter/multi-disciplinary context. Addressing global challenges requires an interdisciplinary approach.
- But needs careful consideration of 'group work' and 'interdisciplinarity', and awareness of complex nature of the curriculum. What about learning? How does group work impact on learning? What does research in this area show us? Has there been any?
- Expectations. The qualification (degree) has to have an economic outcome for the student. They should be able to 'get a job at the end of it' and 'its worth the money to do the degree'. What should be about learning and developing skills, becomes a term of 'economic currency'. But are they mutually exclusive?
- Preparedness and level of education. A staged approach to learning. Requires appropriate background and orienteering. Students who have studied an interdisciplinary undergraduate programme would have brought those critical thinking skills with them from their undergraduate experience, and could be considered to be more 'fully-rounded' as a consequence. 'New' versus 'continuing' students.
- 'Fully-rounded' what does this mean? How do we define it? What are the expectations of master's graduates?
- Challenges. Getting the balance correct. Level of study, depth of coverage and workload are important to consider, to ensure curriculum is not too simple or too complex. Mixed tutor groups, peer and professional skills learning, students' fear of 'the unknown' (i.e. what they don't know).
- Disrupting traditional boundaries between disciplines. 'No silos'. Learning how to learn? Lifelong learning… flexibility/ transferable skills. But it's not for / wouldn't suit everyone's needs.
- Employer's needs? Many value interdisciplinary knowledge and skills- being able to think out of the box; problem solving; working in multidisciplinary teams/environments. Modern professional workplace

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NOTES FROM THE SESSION (continued)

- 'Learning how to learn': thinking and transferring the learning to a different context; applying that learning.
- Issues around recruitment. How can the value of a qualification be communicated to students? How can educators ensure this curriculum is relevant? Is 'interdisciplinary' becoming a subject in its own right? 'Buy-in' from employers and students. We know it works! But how can we get more students involved? Its easy to get 'feedback' but not 'feed-forward'. Can we promote example 'models' of curriculum? Can we develop a MOOC, a short course as a taster, or a Badged Open Course (BOC) on interdisciplinary learning?
- A BOC on 'succeeding in postgraduate study' has been developed at the OU, to serve as a bridge between UG and PG and for induction to PG. Can a similar approach be used for interdisciplinary curriculum 'succeeding in interdisciplinary study' for UG and PG?
- Conversion degrees? Changing disciplines? Conversion Framework or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)? How do we ensure students can start off on a 'level playing field'.

  To round off the session – some of the key findings from the HEA report by Lyall et al. (2015) which were largely reflected in discussions points raised throughout the session, were highlighted:

  Benefits of interdisciplinary curriculum -
  to academics: intellectual, stimulates new thinking, creativity, relationship with research
  to students: employability, demonstrates competencies, flexibility of thinking,
  appreciation of diverse perspectives 'reflection of reality'
  to institutions: new curriculum, new markets, research impacts, 'better-educated' students (Lyall et al. 2015)

  Challenges of interdisciplinary curriculum -
  cultural: 'silo' mentality, comfort zones, institutional structures, understanding 'interdisciplinarity'
  assessment: identifying external examiners with relevant interdisciplinary expertise/awareness
  administrative barriers: resources, timetabling, integration of educational provision takes effort (e.g. bringing together staff members from different disciplines to teach on a course).
  Course directors views differ "as to whether, 'primarily', it is the student's responsibility to integrate the various contributions of different teachers/modules in the programme" (Lyall et al. 2015)

  Concluding thoughts –
  There are intellectual and pedagogic, organisational and structural, social and cultural challenges.
  Considerable variability in 'interdisciplinary' provision – early stage in evolution in UK HE sector.
  Do theories, principles, curriculum ideologies and epistemologies lag behind practice?

  Principles for development of interdisciplinary education (Lyall et al. 2015) -
  1. A whole institution approach
  2. Clarity of purpose
  3. Adequately resourced.

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April 2017