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Curriculum on the map! 10 years of curriculum initiatives in higher education in Australia

Owen Hicks

The University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Australia
ohicks@inet.net.au

‘Curriculum in higher education in Australia – Hello?’ was the title of a paper presented 10 years ago at the 30th HERDSA annual conference. The paper argued that ‘curriculum’ was a term given very limited currency in higher education in Australia, with the focus either restricted to ‘content’ of courses, or as a vehicle for attending to critical issues such as ‘internationalising the curriculum’. It proposed curriculum as having the potential to bring together discipline interests, learning and teaching improvements, the effective use of communication and information technologies for learning, and key issues such as inclusivity, internationalisation, and the development of new programs of study.

Some may lament the continuing minimal attention given to curriculum as a broad unifying concept. However, much has occurred with respect to higher education curriculum in Australia over the past decade, while lack of clarity in the meaning of the term ‘curriculum’ remains. This paper provides an overview of that 10 year history.

Significant drivers of change in Australian universities’ attention to curriculum are highlighted, including the role of a range of government initiatives and bodies such as the ALTC and TEQSA. A textual analysis of university/government ‘compacts’ and a review of accessible web-pages from all Australian universities, are used to illustrate the extent and nature of usage of the term ‘curriculum’ and to map curriculum-related activities across the sector.

The paper concludes with a range of options to promote a place for ‘curriculum in higher education’ as a unifying concept with potential to improve the quality of what can be offered to students in the future.

Keywords: curriculum, drivers, universities, Australia 2007-2017

Introduction

‘Curriculum in higher education in Australia – Hello?’ (Hicks, 2007), consistent with the view of Barnett and Coate (2005) in the UK, argued that ‘curriculum’ was a term given very limited currency in higher education in Australia, with the focus either restricted to ‘content’ of courses, or as a vehicle for addressing critical issues such as ‘internationalising the curriculum’. It proposed curriculum as having the potential to bring together discipline interests, learning and teaching improvements, the effective use of communication and information technologies for learning, and key issues such as inclusivity, internationalisation, and the development of new programs of study. Curriculum was presented as having considerable unifying potential with respect to diverse interests related to universities’ educational offerings.

A full appreciation of ‘curriculum’ in higher education requires a high degree of eclecticism. Definitions of curriculum were noted as multiple and contentious in the 2007 paper. This has

been echoed in many subsequent writings (e.g. Breault & Marshall, 2010; Phan, Lupton, & James, 2016). The past ten years has seen the emergence of a richer, more contentious and conflicting, but relevant literature on higher education curriculum. Kandiko & Blackmore (2012) recognized: “The curriculum, a long neglected field in higher education, has become a live area of debate”. Choosing to take “a very broad view of curricula” they extended curriculum as “a set of purposeful, intended experiences” (Knight, 2001, p. 369) to include “the unstructured and spontaneous learning that takes place within and outside the formal academic environment”, seeing curriculum offering “a useful lens to view higher education” that “sharpens the focus on students and their education” (Kandiko & Blackmore, 2012).

Fraser and Bosanquet (2006), aiming “to promote an inclusive and shared vocabulary as a basis for curriculum development” (p. 269) provided an erudite and useful critique of current understandings of curriculum in higher education, transforming it from ‘not always part of the commonly used language of academics’ (p. 269) into their four research-derived categories of conceptions which they distilled into ‘a product orientation’ and ‘a process orientation’ (p. 276). They critically interrogated their constructions drawing on theorists such as Habermas (1972) and, more specifically in the context of curriculum, Grundy (1987). They argued that “it is essential that the academic community have the commitment to develop a shared language and understanding of curriculum” (p. 282). However, this requirement could be seen as unrealistic and counter to a more pluralist approach to curriculum understandings that would accommodate greater richness and diversity of interpretations, well suited to “the kinds of ‘informed and planned curriculum change[s]’” (p. 282) the sector needs.

Fotheringham, et. al. (2012, p. 1), extended the ‘process’ and ‘product’ curriculum orientations, with the addition of “curriculum as vehicle” - “curriculum as a fulcrum between high level policies and the students that these policies are intended to serve.” They then saw these three conceptions as “not mutually exclusive” and “to be more or less useful at different times and in different academic contexts” (p. 1). While also recognising the need to develop a shared language and understanding of the various meanings of curriculum, they “do not suggest limiting or prescribing how the term curriculum should be understood, and do not reject traditional interpretations” (p. 1). In 2014, Gosper and Ifenthaler noted:

While recognizing variation is important as the various conceptions reflect and shape the design of education for students ..., we have chosen to adopt the broadest possible conception of curriculum ... (p. 2).

Taking “a systems view of the educational experience” they saw curriculum as something that “both shapes and is informed by the learning experiences of students and the outcomes set and achieved.” They also saw, as did Hicks (2007), value in extending the Biggs’ 3P model of teaching and learning (Biggs, 2003) to incorporate notions of curriculum (Gosper & Ifenthaler, 2014, p. 2).

In one of the most recent papers on curriculum, titled ‘Dismantling the curriculum in Higher Education’ (Hall & Smyth, 2016), a challenging and radical critique is given of “curriculum in the global North ..., increasingly co-opted for the production of measurable outcomes, framed by determinist narratives of employability and enterprise.” The authors condemn existing structures of curriculum, highlighting “the bounded nature of the curriculum” and its failure to respond to “a broader crisis of social reproduction or sociability”. They compellingly reinvigorate Grundy’s (1987) challenge of “Curriculum: Product or Praxis?”

Semantic and conceptual difficulties in curriculum analysis

If one institution describes its educational offerings in terms of ‘curriculum’, explicitly using the word, and another describes what it offers with no actual reference to ‘curriculum’, does the first institution have a curriculum, or curricula, and the second not? Some Australian universities appear to use terms such as program, course, learning package, educational experience, educational framework, even educational directions, instead of ‘curriculum’. Some universities make use of the term curriculum in a limited way. Some make use of the term at a broad institutional level and then refrain from using it at the course or program level. Some institutions use the term to include structural and content issues, and also include teaching and learning as a sub-set of curriculum. Others use the term more narrowly, seeing it as one component of a broader set of terms including programs, courses, teaching, learning and assessment. Within universities, individuals at various levels use ‘curriculum’ in different ways, some adopting ‘institutional usage’, others using the term in a more dynamic ‘process’ way, still others choosing not to use the term at all (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 277), condemning what they see as its conventional reference to a pre-determined rigid content ‘delivered’ to students.

The primary attention of this paper is on ‘curriculum’, labelled as such by the user. Written sources of data formed the basis of the review and analysis later in the paper. This data is almost exclusively ‘institutional’ in that it comprises statements made on behalf of universities, governments and related organisations. The analysis complements the research of Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) who gathered data from academic teachers from an Australian university.

The paper recognizes that significant development has taken place in Australian institutions with respect to educational provision that has not been labelled as ‘curriculum’. However such development is largely excluded from the current inquiry. The author’s primary interest has been in the efficacy of the term ‘curriculum’. What has occurred ‘in the name of’ curriculum? Does ‘curriculum’ make a useful contribution to university vernacular? Does it have currency? What value does ‘curriculum’ add to our deliberations about, pronouncements on, and implementation of, Australian universities’ educational offerings?

The study also recognises the limitations of the data sources used. The major sources of data were Universities’ 2014-16 Mission-based Compacts (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2013) and publicly accessible university websites. The compacts, providing a unique snapshot of the language used by each Australian university, were conditioned by some of the parameters stipulated by government. Some university websites are significantly directed towards potential and existing students and use of the term ‘curriculum’ may not have been seen as having ‘marketing appeal’.

National landmarks in the 10 year history, 2007 to 2017

A succinct outline of the drivers for a focus on curriculum was provided by Gosper and Ifenthaler in 2014:

Changing student profiles, the pervasive influence of technologies and the pressure to produce work-ready graduates with more than discipline knowledge are just some of the themes to emerge that are influencing the nature and dynamics of presage, processes and products informing the design of the twenty-first century curriculum (p. 1).

The Executive Summary of the Bradley Report (Bradley, et. al. 2008) on higher education in Australia, while making no reference to curriculum, provides expansion of these drivers giving added emphasis to labour market issues, international competition and internationalisation, equity and access, and regional imperatives. In the body of the report, frequent use is made of the term ‘curriculum’, most commonly in expressions such as ‘internationalising the curriculum’ and ‘embedding cultural competence into the curriculum’.

The Carrick Institute, the ALTC and the OLT

The Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education was established in 2004 “to provide a national focus for the enhancement of learning and teaching in Australian higher education providers” (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2008). It was created as a company with a limited government guarantee and supported by all Australian Universities. The primary focus of the Institute concerned “promoting and supporting strategic change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching, including curriculum development and assessment” (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2008). With a change in name to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2008, the organisation continued to function with the same mandate until 2012, at which time responsibilities were “subsumed by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)” (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2014).

In its early years, the Carrick Institute funded major projects under the Discipline Based Initiatives scheme, involving consortia of discipline leaders from clusters of institutions reviewing programs in their disciplines in Australian universities. The breadth of disciplines undertaking such work was impressive with at least 25 national studies, covering disciplines as diverse as physics, physiotherapy, peace studies, theology, arts and engineering.

In 2006, the Carrick Institute funded projects related to curriculum under its “Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program”, with titles such as “Closing the gap in curriculum development leadership” and “Enhancing the student educational experience through school-based curriculum improvement leaders”.

Curriculum also received attention under the Carrick/ALTC Fellows and Senior Fellows scheme. Sally Kift worked on the development of a set of guiding principles for “intentional First Year Curriculum design”. Ian Cameron worked in chemical engineering to demonstrate the effectiveness of Project Centred Curriculum. As a more recent example of fellowship activity, Romy Lawson (Lawson et al., 2013) identified a range of good practice strategies “for curriculum mapping and data collection in assuring GAs [graduate attributes]”. She also argued for a “‘whole-of-course’ curriculum-design approach for assuring learning focuses around course (degree) learning outcomes” (Lawson, 2015, p. 5).

In 2008, prompted by a roundtable the previous year, and to give specific focus to curriculum, the ALTC included ‘Curriculum renewal’ as a category in its Priority Projects Program. These projects were expected to:

develop and model contemporary curricula that meet student and employer needs and provide the basis for ongoing personal and professional development for students (Hicks, 2009).

The ALTC also funded scoping studies to map, examine and comment on selected curriculum issues commonly experienced across disciplines, for ongoing improvement within and across the sector.

In their ‘Good practice report’, Narayan and Edwards (2011) identified 40 projects and seven fellowships funded by the ALTC in the area of ‘curriculum renewal’ in higher education. The projects were typically discipline specific and came from a broad range of more than twenty discipline areas. The report argued for a “continuous renewal cycle” (p. 7) and saw as a major theme “the need for a change of culture and curricular processes not just at the organisational level, but also at the fundamental level of the educators themselves” (p. 1).

To the consternation of the sector, the OLT oversaw the scaling down of these initiatives from 2012, with a reduction in funding, a number of unfulfilled proposals for alternative structures, and the eventual closing of the Office in 2016.

AUQA, TEQSA and government and industry recognition of ‘curriculum’

In 2000, the Australian Government created an auditing body, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). It functioned separate from, but in parallel with, the developmental work of the Carrick Institute and the ALTC, till August 2011.

AUQA was established as an independent agency by state and national governments to promote, audit, and report on quality assurance in higher education, with responsibility to conduct audits every five years (Chalmers, et. al., 2008).

The most recent AUQA Audit Manual (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2011) made repeated use of the term curriculum. Frequent reference was made in the Manual to ‘curriculum development’ and ‘internationalisation of the curriculum’. It highlighted ‘Curriculum and Courses’ as one of ten ‘Specific Academic Activities’

As part of ‘Teaching and Learning’ in the ‘Audit Framework’, the Manual mentioned:

- Curriculum underpinned by substantial level of scholarship, coherent body of knowledge, theoretical framework
- Curriculum review, policies and monitoring of reviews including quality and relevance of courses (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2011, p. 100).

The impact of the AUQA requirements can be seen in the mirroring of ‘AUQA language’ in institutional audit reports, particularly the references made to curriculum.

By 2012, AUQA auditing and reporting responsibilities had become the responsibility of a new body, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), with:

a dual focus on ensuring that higher education providers meet minimum standards, as well as promoting best practice and improving the quality of the higher education sector as a whole (Australian Government TEQSA, 2012).

‘Curriculum’ doesn’t appear on TEQSA webpages. Further, the Australian Qualifications Framework makes only a single reference to ‘curriculum’, as a subset of what they term ‘a program of learning’ (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

The Higher Education Standards Framework, Version 1: December 2011 (Australian Government, 2011), made no mention of ‘curriculum’, referring to ‘course design’ requirements instead. The 2015 Standards Framework document (Australian Government,

2015) also used the term ‘course design’, though it is interesting to note this was broadened:

to include various other design characteristics including entry requirements and pathways, the nature of the content, the expected learning outcomes, their sequence of attainment and assessment, and professional accreditation if required (Australian Government TEQSA, 2016).

This statement begins to approximate a definition of curriculum, though still failing to incorporate some critical aspects.

The latest Australian Government ‘options for reform’ paper on higher education (Australian Government, 2016) makes no use of the term ‘curriculum’, preferring ‘course’, ‘course offerings’, ‘course design’ and ‘course structure’, while making extensive use of the expression ‘teaching and learning’.

The Business Council of Australia *Action Plan for Enduring Prosperity: Realising the Potential of People and Workplaces* (2013) made no mention of curriculum, while making passing reference to the need for “more differentiated specialist university courses”. In 2015, the Australian industry sponsored report, *Innovate and Prosper*, highlighted the benefits of companies creating partnerships “to help develop curriculum that is tailored to their future strategy” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, Australian Industry Group, Australian Technology Network of Universities, 2015, p. 11).

There does appear to be a declining use of the term ‘curriculum’ in Australian Government documents while industry continues to make some use of the term. If the ALTC and AUQA helped put ‘curriculum on the map’, its absence from TEQSA, Australian government and departmental documentation is likely to see a declining use of the word in communications from universities to government.

Analysis of institutional usage of ‘curriculum’ in 2014-16 compacts

“Compacts are an agreement between the Commonwealth and individual universities.” (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2013). These funding-dependent ‘mission-based’ compacts require articulation of universities’ major policy objectives, while also addressing current government priorities. Requiring information in sections titled ‘Teaching and Learning’ and ‘Research and Research Training’, the 2014-16 compact guidelines stipulated by government made no direct mention of ‘curriculum’.

The institutions’ compact statements varied in length from approximately 12,000 to 20,000 words. They contained a great deal of language in common, but also some interesting variation, such as in their use of the term ‘curriculum’. Word searching on the stem ‘curric’ (curriculum, curricular and curricula), showed that all universities used the word at least once in their compact. From the forty compacts searched, 611 occurrences of ‘curric...’ were found. Thirty institutions had occurrences numbering from one to twenty. Ten used ‘curric...’ more than twenty times. Text analysis (Fairclough, 2003) was used to seek meaning from the use of ‘curric...’ in context. While many occurrences were isolated and unqualifiable by context, where meanings could be imputed these were attached to institutions according to the categories of description identified by Fraser and Bosanquet (2006, p. 273). Category A curriculum – the structure and content of the unit (subject) - was used at least once by 30 institutions; Category B curriculum – the structure and content of a program of study – was used at least once by 38 institutions; Category C curriculum – the students’ experience of

learning – was used at least once by 24 institutions; and Category D curriculum – a dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning – was used at least once by just 8.

Not surprisingly, given the nature of the compacts, their source and target recipient, structural aspects dominated usage of ‘curriculum’. However, a significant number also appeared to be using curriculum as ‘a process that enables student learning’, Category C (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 275). There was also evidence suggesting some institutions viewed curriculum as ‘teacher and student acting as co-constructors of knowledge’, Category D (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 276), however the total frequency of these occurrences was low. The data presented here is similar to that of Fraser and Bosanquet and could be subject to similar critique.

Analysis of institutional curriculum initiatives identified from university websites

Publicly accessible web pages from the forty universities listed by the Australian Education Network (2017) were searched for the term ‘curriculum’. The context of occurrences was then interrogated to determine how the term appeared to be used and to identify related institutional initiatives.

1. Curriculum – broad institution use

While all Australian universities mention curriculum on their publicly accessible websites, as few as five (Flinders, James Cook, Macquarie, Tasmania and the Sunshine Coast) articulated its meaning. In general, the term appears to be used in a somewhat vague and restricted sense relating to content of courses, to program structures, or to design issues.

Five universities made explicit mention of curriculum in their vision or mission statements while as many as seventeen made reference to the term in strategic plans. Twenty-three universities outlined a philosophical approach or emphasis in their curriculum. These were contained in stand-alone statements, more general ‘framework’ documents, or in strategic plans.

Nine universities outlined what could be considered elaborated curriculum models, most but not all using ‘curriculum’, e.g. the ‘JCU Curriculum Framework’, ‘Bond Core Curriculum’ and ‘The Melbourne Curriculum’.

Some evidence exists to show a sustained institutional attention to curriculum, rather than ‘one-off’ initiatives, though there were also examples of the latter. At least twenty universities currently have institution-wide curriculum initiatives in progress. Some of these commenced in the first decade of this century and many project to the year 2020. Incorporation within institutional plans appears to be the most common mechanism for maintaining and renewing curriculum initiatives. However, while some institutions had identified curriculum models enshrined within their strategic plans, others made superficial mention of curriculum in their plans without any significant detail.

2. Committees responsible for curriculum

Surprisingly few, only six, universities appeared to have standing committees with the word ‘curriculum’ included in the title. ‘Education committees’, ‘teaching and learning committees’ and ‘quality assurance committees’ predominated. Committees that did mention curriculum typically contained the term ‘curriculum standards’. Edith Cowan University currently has a

‘Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee’ while La Trobe University noted its ‘Education Committee’ had previously had this title. Committees at an additional five institutions made explicit mention of curriculum in their mandates, while the term was not actually used in the committee’s title. Intranet pages could well identify significantly greater use of ‘curriculum’ in committee titles.

In some instances, committees were created to implement institutional curriculum initiatives. In other cases, existing structures were given curriculum renewal responsibilities. Typically, these were teaching and learning committees. However, considerable variation could be found in the language used for such structures, e.g. Macquarie University created a ‘Learning and Teaching Strategic Framework 2015-2020’ to be implemented by the ‘Learning Innovation Hub’, with ‘curriculum’ mentioned subsequently in ‘more detailed targets’.

3. Provision of assistance and support for curriculum related activity

Most universities provided some form of support to faculties for the implementation of institutional curriculum initiatives, e.g. Western Sydney University’s ‘Curriculum Transformation’ initiative claimed to provide curriculum advisers to all schools.

At least twelve institutions provided courses on curriculum development and design, typically run from centres for learning and teaching, sometimes prompted by institutional initiatives or otherwise part of the established program of the centre. Twenty-nine universities explicitly identified assistance with curriculum development and design as part of the offerings of central units. In some instances, this took the form of dedicated advisers allocated to particular faculties and departments, in others a general opportunity to consult on curriculum issues was made available. In a few cases resources related to institutional curriculum initiatives were prepared and made accessible on-line.

4. Evaluation of institutions’ curricula

There is very little evidence of institutions attempting to evaluate the effectiveness or ‘success’ of institutional curriculum initiatives. Many institutions appear to have some form of monitoring structure or process, e.g. Macquarie University’s ‘Macq Curriculum Standards Framework’, but little actual evaluation of major initiatives, at least not available on their publicly accessible websites. Edith Cowan University’s ‘Curriculum 2012 and Beyond (C2012)’ was a three-year project, ‘successfully completed’ on 30 June 2013. While the resulting ‘framework’ is now claimed to be embedded in teaching and learning policy and practices, measures of its effectiveness are unclear.

It appears that, rather than any significant evaluation, a pragmatic approach is taken by institutions with respect to ‘curriculum renewal’. Initiatives are negotiated through the university in a range of contexts. Some ‘renewal’ is found to be workable and acceptable and thought to improve the educational offerings, and is deemed successful. Other renewal initiatives are dispensed with or modified until seen as acceptable in the light of a range of competing constraints, contexts and interests.

Where are we now and what of the future?

Clearly, a great deal has happened with respect to curriculum in higher education in Australia over the past ten years. Numerous curriculum projects were initiated by the ALTC, including national discipline-specific reviews of curriculum; AUQA guidelines encouraged the use of the term in institutional audit reports; the majority of universities in the country have

undertaken some form of curriculum renewal; key issues confronting Australian higher education, such as internationalisation, cultural relevance and employment-related learning, have been seen in the context of curriculum; and the body of academic literature on curriculum in higher education has increased significantly.

Three specific concerns arise in the paper:

1. The declining use of the term ‘curriculum’ by government.
2. The continuing dominance of ‘curriculum’ as ‘course content’
3. The need for more attention to evaluation of curriculum initiatives.

This paper argues for a broad and multifaceted interpretation and use of ‘curriculum’ in Australian universities. The ‘rationale, content, process, structure of the learning, and assessment’ package of ‘curriculum’ of ten years ago (Hicks, 2007) still has currency, as does ‘curriculum as becoming’ (Barnett & Coate, 2005), but so also does the continuing critique of a ‘blinker’ largely functionalist interpretation of curriculum. With the rapid development of emerging educational technologies and continuing pressures on the system to commercialise and compete, the full gamut of curriculum meanings have contributions to make. While some change is to be embraced and implemented, other change must be resisted. Understandings of curriculum can assist both these processes. Attempts to standardise and simplify our understanding and use of the term are likely to be limiting and fruitless. Better that the academic community encourage more use of ‘curriculum’, by government, by universities in public documents, and by colleagues in robust discussion in formal and informal gatherings, face-to-face and online.

If ‘curriculum’ is to maintain currency it must be in our language and our thinking. Perhaps it is time to overturn ‘teaching and research’ (what we as academics do) and ‘walk the talk’ of ‘curriculum and research’ (what we offer to students and the wider community). The dichotomous expression ‘teaching and learning’ (or ‘learning and teaching’), typically interpreted as ‘what the teacher does’ and ‘what the student does’ could beneficially be replaced by ‘curriculum’, ‘what we engage in together’.

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