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### **Understanding the Higher Education Curriculum in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

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#### **Academic Biography:**

Dr Sam Peach is Dean of the Faculty of Sport, Media Arts and Management at the University College Plymouth St Mark and St John. Having gained her doctorate from the University of Exeter in 2007 in which the focus for her thesis was the Higher Education Curriculum, Sam has been extensively involved in action research linked to curriculum development within her own institution and further research into curriculum philosophy in Higher Education.

#### **Abstract:**

*The Higher Education (HE) curriculum in the twenty-first century is a highly contested arena in which different epistemological constructs and paradigms compete to shape and determine its form, content and character. This paper explores these interacting forces, epistemological pressures and drivers of paradigmatic change in order to provide a critical insight and understanding of the contemporary HE curriculum. The paper is written from my perspective as a Dean of Faculty in a University College of Higher Education and draws upon the findings of an ethnographic case study of curriculum at my own institution (Peach, 2010). The paper aims to offer an interpretive analysis and overview of the key catalysts of curriculum change: i) the changing student body; ii) student consumerism and the marketisation of HE; iii) political and economic incentives for HE curricula to be more vocationally oriented and directly linked to economic priorities and workforce development and iv) the reconstruction and reorientation of knowledge within a 'knowledge society'. It is suggested that the change in emphasis from traditional liberal education towards more utilitarian, vocational and functional curricula will continue and result in the emergence of more programmes focused on specific employment fields with an increasing trend to embed professional accreditation and industry endorsement. A growth in what is currently perceived as 'non-standard' curricula with some radical and innovative remodelling of curricula involving more flexible, personalised, work-based, distance, online, part-time and accelerated*

*programme structures and modes of learning and delivery is predicted in order to meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders from 2012 onwards.*

**Key words:** epistemological constructs and paradigms, utilitarian, vocational, functional, curriculum, curricula, remodelling, radical, programme structures, flexible, personalised, work-based, distance, online, part-time, accelerated, re-theorising, transdisciplinary, knowledge production, application context, working knowledge, experiential knowing, knowledge society, professional accreditation, industry endorsement.

#### **Introduction**

Curriculum is arguably the most significant and important concept in understanding Higher Education (HE), despite the surprising paucity of research and the academic community's lack of serious debate and engagement with the topic (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Quinn, 2003). Therefore, whilst a tacit understanding of the concept exists, curriculum remains an ambiguous, complex and dynamic entity and there is clearly a plurality of perspectives and vantage points from which to view and analyse the concept. As such the HE curriculum in the twenty-first century is a highly contested arena in which different epistemological constructs and paradigms compete to shape and determine its form, content and character. Until recently, the dominant influence on the curriculum has been the academic community with institutions determining the content and structure of their own curricula. Today's curricula, however, appear to be increasingly shaped and determined by a number of external stakeholders, (government, business and industry, professional bodies and students) with multiple and competing ideological, political and economic agendas, all struggling to impress their weight and influence the curriculum. The undergraduate curriculum has been radically transformed and is now influenced by a plethora of competing internal and external forces. Indeed, the evolution from an 'elite' through 'mass' to 'universal' (Trow, 2006) HE system has

seen a diversification and broadening of the HE curriculum beyond traditional academic subjects and full-time three year undergraduate degrees. New paradigms manifested in, for example, the deconstruction of the discipline through modularisation, the learning-through-experience and key skills movements and web-based learning have been accepted, integrated and subsumed as HE has adapted its cultures and curricula to changing political priorities, economic incentives and external drivers.

However, as HE moves from an era of public funding entitlements to a new and still emerging world of personal loan repayment funding, in an increasingly competitive market place and at a time of imminent demographic change, it has become apparent that there are serious challenges facing curricula in HE. The nature of these challenges needs to be understood and thus the purpose of this paper is to explore the interacting forces, epistemological pressures and drivers of paradigmatic change in order to provide a critical insight and understanding of the contemporary HE curriculum. In doing so, it is also hoped that the paper will contribute to bringing curriculum to greater prominence and provide further encouragement for the HE community to engage in the urgently needed debate about HE curricula.

The paper is written from my perspective as a Dean of Faculty in a University College of Higher Education and almost 20 years as an academic within the HE sector. My approach, which draws upon the findings of an ethnographic case study of curriculum at my own institution (Peach, 2010), is to offer an interpretive analysis and overview of the key catalysts of change to provide an empirically informed understanding of the factors mediating and shaping the form and character of contemporary HE curricula. It is recognised that significant institutional diversity exists within the sector and that different “groups” of HE institutions (e.g. Russell Group, Post-92s, Colleges of HE) and other tertiary level institutions offering HE may well respond,

adapt or resist in different ways. Yet, as Scott (2009, p406) argues ‘processes of student expansion, institutional growth and sectoral enlargement have all to some degree been subsumed within a larger and more differentiated process of diversification and marketisation that has impacted on all types of institution’. Thus, although this paper ostensibly draws upon research conducted within a teaching-focused university college, I would argue that whilst the findings will be especially pertinent to institutions of a similar type, mission and focus to that of my own, the findings have relevance for curricula practice across the whole sector.

The catalysts of change have been summarised under the four headings below and are discussed in turn but it should be noted that there is inevitably a strong inter-dependence and symbiotic relationship between them:

- The Changing Student Body
- Student consumerism and the marketisation of HE
- Political and economic incentives for HE curricula to be more vocationally oriented and directly linked to economic priorities and workforce development.
- The reconstruction and reorientation of knowledge within a ‘knowledge society’.

### **The Changing Student Body**

Although a multitude of factors shape the form and character of the HE curriculum, there is no doubt that the increasingly diverse and demanding student body represents a powerful force behind the curriculum challenges currently facing HEIs. The widening participation agenda and the move from an elite to a universal HE system has inevitably created significant challenges for curriculum design and brought about a series of intentional and unintentional curricular changes. Bridges (2000) notes how the identity of the student community has become more diffuse, larger and topographically more dispersed, representing a greater span of ages and cultural backgrounds and invariably

including larger numbers who combines academic study with part-time work.

The academics interviewed in Peach (2010) indicated that curriculum aims, content, delivery modes, learning and teaching methods and assessments are all mediated by the type of students on the programme. Significant changes in the student population and a concomitant diversification of student expectations, both in terms of what they wish to gain from HE and in terms of how they wish to engage with the experience have had major implications for the curriculum. Traditional curricula that catered for what was once a relatively small, elite and homogenous group of students being prepared for academic careers or a limited number of professions via full-time study are no longer appropriate for many of today's students. During the last three decades, the much enlarged student body has shifted from being predominantly male school leavers to a clear majority of females and a significantly higher percentage of mature entrants. The new generation of students has new needs and different attitudes towards HE (Jary & Jones, 2006; Letherby, 2006; Quinn, 2006) and this has forced many HEIs to make curriculum changes.

A substantial number of the new influx of students are not as academically well prepared for traditional academic study at undergraduate level (Becher, 1994a; Davis, 2003; Letherby, 2006). Letherby (2006, p.251), for example, suggests that the type of students we are increasingly seeing, 'have low attention spans – able to 'txt' but not write a sentence, and internet (but not library) savvy – and sometimes choose HE because of a lack of other choices'. Consequently one of the key curriculum changes implemented in recent years has been the widespread introduction of core academic skills or the embedding of generic study skills into the curriculum due to the increasing number of students who do not possess the necessary academic skills to adequately cope with a degree programme. There was overwhelming agreement from participants in my study

on the perception that the "*quality of intake of students academically is getting weaker*" and that this was having an impact on the curriculum since the introduction of "*more basic skills teaching*" inevitably takes place at the expense of something else. Many HEIs, like my own, due to their mission, ethos and heritage are firmly committed to agenda such as widening participation and this accompanied with strong economic imperatives to recruit to target, often results in such HEIs typically attracting (and accepting) traditionally less academic students. Participants defined students as weak, based on their perceived lack of traditional academic abilities, despite emerging evidence suggesting that different types of knowledge should also be recognised and valued in HE curricula to reflect the new generation of students (Jary & Jones, 2006; Quinn, 2006). Indeed Jary & Jones (2006, p.18) argue that expanding provision and widening access to HE brings, 'different but not necessarily worse' students into the HE sector. They advocate that, 'in each generation "new students" will in many cases have new needs, as will the economy and society'. These 'new needs' inevitably have had huge implications for the HE curriculum and it is clear that the changing student profile represents a key catalyst for curriculum change. It will be interesting to monitor the impact and institutional responses to the decision to remove controls on those places taken by students who achieve AAB grades at A-Level or equivalent on the curriculum and whether this will lead to a two-tiered approach within the sector.

Furthermore the rise in student numbers has been accompanied by a proliferation of new programmes to accommodate the new and diverse range of students now entering HE. As Smith & Webster (1997, p.100) note, the increase in student numbers in HE provided the catalyst for, 'an astonishing growth of new subject areas and associated knowledges'. Many of these subject curricula have a strong vocational orientation that challenges the traditional view of academic knowledge and learning. However, Reay et al (2005,

p.ix) argue, 'a significant proportion of this expansion is made up of redefining or including activities not before considered or counted as HE'. The emergence of new subjects in HE is, therefore, the transfer or importation of those subject areas from a different sector as HE institutions assume the responsibility for the 'training' of a far wider range of occupations and professions. The desire for newly emerging professions to gain legitimacy by becoming a graduate profession and the professionalisation of many traditionally non-graduate vocational areas such as para-medical professional education, for instance, has resulted in the training of these professions being transferred into the HE curriculum. HE now appears to be taking on the education and training previously undertaken by the Further Education sector, professional bodies or industry-related training organisations. Indeed, as Watson (2009, p.31) notes, 'the "new university" sector has in fact tapped a historically rich vein of locally relevant, largely vocational and professional post-compulsory education'. Thus, the broadening of the HE curriculum beyond traditional academic disciplines such as philosophy, history or sociology to include new subject areas such as 'ethical hacking and network security', 'nursing' and 'environmental health' represents a radical shift for the HE curriculum. Moreover, the inclusion of subjects such as nursing in the HE sector has also radically transformed the professional training and qualifications of the nursing profession. Indeed the range of subjects that now constitute the wider HE curriculum is substantially greater than in any previous era and whilst vocationally oriented degrees have existed since the inception of the HE system, there appears to be an increasing trend of programmes narrowly focused on specific employment fields. The computer games industry, for example, has spawned a range of very successful degrees, many of which have been collaboratively designed with employers in the industry.

Furthermore, in addition to challenging the traditional subject as the dominant structure in the HE curriculum and changes to the curriculum content (i.e. the inclusion of more academic skills teaching) the changing profile of the student body has also provided much of the impetus for the introduction of different types of provision and modes of delivery. Whilst the full-time three year degree remains the most popular mode of undergraduate study, there is a rapidly growing part-time sector and an increasing variety of undergraduate programmes, including foundation degrees, accelerated (fast track) Honours degrees, Higher National Diplomas and Certificates (HND/Cs), higher level apprenticeships and other credit-bearing provision. As efforts to widen participation have gathered pace, there has been greater demand for more locally accessible HE and this has resulted in the growth of provision of foundation degrees in particular delivered within Further Education Colleges.

Likewise the demand for and increasing availability and accessibility of information and communication technologies to support, for example, part-time provision, more flexible learning, distance learning, online and blended learning and work-based learning to meet the needs of students to combine study with earning money or to cater for students with other commitments has had a dramatic pedagogical and cultural impact on the HE curriculum. New developments in information and communication technology are also transforming knowledge in the curriculum and modes of delivery and assessment. Technological developments have not only opened up access to knowledge but have also changed the way in which students engage with knowledge. The Internet has facilitated faster access to a massive arena of data and challenges the deeper levels of engagement with knowledge that were previously developed over time (Barnett & Coate, 2005). It also undermines the notion of a curriculum providing the organising framework for the selection, ordering and transmission of knowledge

as vast bodies of knowledge are readily accessible via the web (Bridges, 2000). Similarly, Burbules & Callister (1999, p.2) suggest that since the way in which knowledge is taught ultimately forms and reshapes knowledge, the new technologies constitute curricular changes by providing alternative methods of learning. Indeed as Barnett & Coate (2005, p.90) indicate, 'technologies make possible the commodification of knowledge, through curriculum packages, web-based courses and digitised texts', and whilst the commodification of knowledge inevitably has its dangers, such as a potential lack of criticality, it has facilitated the development of more distance-based and flexible curricula (Hudson et al, 1997).

#### **Student consumerism and the marketisation of Higher Education.**

The HE curriculum has also undergone a radical transformation in recent years due to the imposition of the values of market competition and consumerist ideologies. Successive governments' belief in market competition, their emphasis on the importance of customer choice and the introduction of variable tuition fees has increased the responsiveness of HE institutions to market forces and to the notion of the 'student as customer'. HE is about to undergo a further transformation as it moves from an era of public funding entitlements to a new and still emerging world of private funding and income generation in a highly competitive market place. A degree can now be regarded as an investment, a commodity to be bought and traded and curricula are essentially being designed to attract students based upon a market philosophy that ultimately depends on consumer demand. Barnett & Coate (2005) use the metaphor 'curriculum as consumption' to conceptualise and reflect this way of thinking about and understanding the contemporary HE curriculum.

This is leading to the rapid expansion of popular subjects and the closure of other subjects that are unable to

recruit, thereby creating a tension between consumerist ideology and the underpinning philosophical purpose of HE to contribute to the development of a productive society.

Morley (2003) notes that this reconstruction of students as customers has changed pedagogical relations in the academy. She argues that, 'students are increasingly perceived as carriers of power' and the emphasis now appears to be on keeping the students happy (p.91). Indeed, Morley (2003) argues customer satisfaction is undermining the curriculum's traditional identification with academic discipline knowledge and intellectual challenge since 'presentation and contract are gaining hegemonic power over content' (p.82) Challenging students intellectually has become reconstructed as 'risk' (Said, 1994) for fear of negative student feedback. Indeed, as Wes Streeting (2009, p.58), President of the National Union of Students observed, 'teachers are under growing pressure to give students what they want, and not what they need'. Academics in Peach's (2010) study noted how student reaction and feedback had become increasingly influential and provided examples of how students had engineered changes to assessments (*the number of times you've been in a staff student liaison meeting and we end up taking an exam out of a module because students didn't like it!*) and instigated fundamental changes to content such as increasing greater practical knowledge in the curriculum. Indeed Brooks (2001) argues that this focus on customer satisfaction has resulted in a significant realignment of HE curricula away from epistemological foundations of the knowledge base and towards a more technocratic, instrumental view of knowledge. Academics are expected to design and market curricula packages as commercial products since, as Gewirtz (2002, p.71) stresses, 'the market rewards positioning rather than principles and encourages commercial rather than educational decision-making.' This is threatening the continuation of certain subjects, particularly within some of the traditional academic

disciplines, whose popularity and recruitment have fallen with the emergence and growth of new and vocationally oriented subject areas.

Findings from Peach (2010) provided evidence that pressures from students and market forces were leading to curriculum changes in order to 'popularise' the curriculum. The study identified an emergent trend to re-brand and repackage programmes into what might be considered more exciting and appealing vocationally oriented titles in order to attract students, since vocational qualifications are increasingly being privileged over general, academic courses by the market (Kruss, 2004). Hence institutions are under pressure to design curricula that attract students and students appear increasingly to be selecting courses based on financial and economic imperatives such as employment prospects and return on their investment.

Critically, however, as Byron (2002) argues the market does not necessarily know what is good for it and consumer-driven changes may not actually be beneficial to consumers. Students cannot necessarily understand their educational needs in advance and HE curricula should therefore not change simply to become more attractive to potential students. That is not to say however that HEIs should not legitimately be responsive in order to accommodate the new demands of a more diverse body of students but that challenging curricula, rigour and substance should not be traded-off in the interest of improving student satisfaction.

The marketisation of HE alongside restrictions on student recruitment has resulted in many institutions seeking a greater share of the international student market. International student fees have provided financial incentives for many institutions and together with the globalisation agenda have resulted in curriculum changes to internationalise the curriculum via amendments in content to include more global issues and perspectives and learning resources to reflect

research and literature across the world. Modes of delivery have also changed or been redesigned to accommodate distance learning or to meet the needs and expectations of an international student which are often different to those of the home student. New curricula have, therefore, been developed to specifically target and attract international students and whilst the internationalisation agenda has had many positive impacts on the HE curriculum, not least in terms of promoting greater diversity and plurality of perspectives, the challenges of meeting the needs of both home and international students should not be underestimated and inevitably involves an element of curriculum compromise.

**Political and economic incentives for HE curricula to be more vocationally oriented and directly linked to economic priorities and workforce development.**

Higher Education policy since the 1980s has been heavily influenced and determined by business and economic needs in an attempt to improve the economic competitiveness of British industry. The recent growth in work-related and vocationally focused foundation degrees, for example, can be attributed to a number of funding incentives, including additional student numbers (ASNs) and the foundation degree premium/targeted allocation. Likewise the allocation of all recent ASNs within the sector has been strategically managed to ensure that they are explicitly linked to economic priorities and workforce development. The introduction of 'co-funded' ASNs in which employers contribute to the design, delivery and cost of the programme represents another political and economic mechanism for ensuring HE curriculum development is vocationally oriented and directly informed by employers. Employers and business leaders have successfully persuaded consecutive governments that the traditional curricula of HE are no longer appropriate to the needs of business and industry in the twenty-first century and that economic progress in today's society



relies on the information industry or more specifically on the skills of its graduate workforce. Widespread concern about graduate unemployment also raised concerns about the appropriateness of 'traditional' curriculum and led to calls for greater emphasis on employability and vocational relevance in the HE curriculum. This in turn led to increased pressure for the inclusion of work based learning opportunities and what has been referred to as the key skills movement. Both these developments created disruption to the traditional form and character of the HE curriculum and will be discussed below.

### **Work-based learning (WBL)**

Preparation for employment and an understanding of the world of work has led to pressure for the inclusion of work experience or WBL in the undergraduate curriculum (Bridges 2000; Blackwell et al, 2001; Billet, 2006; Murphy, 2008). Learning through work has always been recognised in HE in a variety of ways and arrangements for training professional practitioners within subjects such as law and medicine have been in place for many decades. However, the pressure for a much wider range of programmes including traditionally academic ones, to include more WBL elements has gained increasing momentum. A curriculum that focuses on the development of graduate employability skills raises the question as to whether these skills can be taught purely in an HE institution. The very idea of WBL acknowledges that work practices are imbued with learning opportunities and WBL can be seen as a way of making curricula more 'relevant' as well as improving students' readiness for work through experience in the work place.

However, as Boud & Symes (2000) acknowledge, 'the impetus for work-based education is not just instrumental'. The transformation from an elite to a mass HE system and the government's widening participation agenda has led institutions to diversify the ways of undertaking a degree. Work-based learning gives academic recognition and accredits work as a

legitimate area of learning and, in doing so, not only reduces the time on campus but also increases the repertoire and flexibility of delivery modes. It thereby grants opportunities to those who might not otherwise benefit from HE by allowing them to incorporate their working knowledge into a degree programme (Symes & McIntyre, 2000).

The interest and increase in vocationally orientated curricula and work-based learning in HE has been stimulated not only by political and economical forces but also from an educational perspective due to the need for new learning relationships between education and work that will support lifelong learning and ensure societies are economically competitive.

The claims of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provide a new perspective for examining the relationship between curricula, learning and work and have had an influential impact on recent developments within education and curriculum planning. This is reflected in the current trends emphasising experiential and WBL and in the educational role of non-specialist learning organisations.

Several authors argue the case for curricula frameworks to include various forms of apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger 1991; Guile & Young, 1998; Billet, 2006) or WBL placements (Blackwell et al, 2001) in order to take account of the influence of context upon learning. It is not unusual for modularised programmes to include a placement module in which students will effectively be given the opportunity to participate in 'communities of practice' and engage in the process of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students can develop knowledge, skill and understanding through contact and participation with more experienced practitioners.

Bridges (2000, p.47) also suggests that the development of experiential learning as part of the HE curriculum challenges not only the traditional conception of academic knowledge but also, 'the role of academics as

constructors and guardians of a specialised form of articulated knowledge'. Experiential learning therefore threatens academics' privileged position of authority in the construction and reproduction of knowledge (Scott, 1997; Jones & Little, 1999; Bridges, 2000). The notion of lifelong learning also provides greater legitimacy to other places of learning and particularly the workplace with an increasing awareness of the need for continuing professional development. Indeed it is not uncommon for work-related elements or in-company delivery to receive formal accreditation and credits towards an HE award. Closer links with the world of work have also led to HEIs working in collaboration with public sector and public service organisations to deliver bespoke or negotiated programmes (e.g. Foundation Degree in Policing) and to develop mechanisms for the HE sector to recognise prior experiential learning through work.

The introduction of WBL into HE curricula not only acknowledges the workplace as both a site of knowledge creation and for significant learning but also raises fundamental questions regarding who should determine the validity of learning from the workplace and how it should be assessed. Similarly, students will encounter more teachers from a variety of backgrounds, both professional and academic as the seat of learning shifts to include agencies outside the academy (Bridges, 2000).

It is clear that the learning from experience movement and specifically WBL has had a radical impact on the HE curriculum and the indications are that this is likely to continue and expand. Aspects of work-based learning have been integrated into many traditional programmes but it would appear that there is now an emerging trend for programmes specifically informed by a paradigm of WBL. Such programmes recognise the concepts, theories and practices of WBL as a locus of legitimate, higher level learning in its own right (Murphy, 2008).

### **Key skills**

The key skills agenda exerted pressure on the curriculum because it is derived from and based upon the needs of

the national economy rather than the traditional liberal philosophy of HE. Education for its own sake is, therefore, replaced with a notion of 'economic functionality' (p.45) since one of the main aims of the key skills agenda was to demonstrate employability. Thus in a similar fashion to the way work-based learning can be seen as a response to political and economic agenda the key skills movement also represented an attempt to enable graduates to be immediately effective in the workplace (Bowden & Masters, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Toohey, 1999). The wide range of nomenclature for skills (Bennett et al, 2000) has contributed to the conceptual ambiguity in defining key skills and in distinguishing them from core skills, transferable skills and generic skills. However, the movement to make these key skills a part of the formal curriculum was widespread and received financial support from the Government who considered that traditional curricula focused too much on academic knowledge (with a predominant focus on critical evaluation) and that insufficient attention was devoted to practical skills (of applying, creating and innovating) and the development of personal attributes (Bourner, 2004). The key skills agenda placed a new emphasis on what a graduate needed to be able to *do* in contrast with what they needed to *know* and shifted the balance from understanding to skill and from 'knowing that' to 'knowing how' (Bridges, 2000).

The impact of HE's response to the world of work has been a universal shift in the direction of performativity (Barnett, 2000) and a reorientation of the boundaries around academic knowledge. This has led to a transformation in emphasis from traditional liberal education towards more utilitarian, vocational and functional curricula.

### **The reconstruction and reorientation of knowledge within a 'knowledge society'.**

The fourth major driving force of change in curricula in HE is the change in beliefs about knowledge. There has



been much debate concerning the way knowledge is defined, valued, organised, selected and controlled in modern societies. Theories about the nature of knowledge are implicit in all theories that underpin curriculum development and it is possible to identify how changing perceptions of 'worthwhile' and 'valid' conceptions of knowledge are impacting upon HE curricula.

The emphasis and predominance of abstract, theoretical knowledge as a characteristic feature of traditional curricula is now being questioned in today's rapidly changing and globalised world. Concomitant with increasing global economic competition there has been a radical re-theorising of knowledge and learning. The Government's vision and strategy is based upon a rationale that recognises that sustaining a competitive, productive economy requires a highly skilled workforce with a culture of lifelong learning. Given the process of continuous innovation and the unprecedented pace of change within modern work practice it is recognised that new knowledge has a rapidly decreasing lifespan. Gibbons et al (1994) for instance, emphasise how traditional knowledge production (to which they refer to as mode 1), firmly located within an academic disciplinary framework and based upon the separation of production and application can be slow and not easily adaptable to changing demands in society. In contrast a new mode of knowledge production to which Gibbons et al refer to as mode 2 or transdisciplinary knowledge has emerged. Mode 2 knowledge production breaks down the disciplinary forms of problem solving so that discipline-based individuals form partnerships with business or community groups to work collaboratively within a social or economic 'application context' to produce knowledge related to specific problems. Doing so entails an integration of knowledge from different sources and particularly theoretical and practical knowledge. This new epistemological formulation of knowledge favours a form of knowing that has a utilitarian function centred upon use-value and

application and is referred to by Symes & McIntyre (2000) as 'working knowledge'.

Short (2002, p.142) describes this type of knowledge as 'practical-oriented', 'mission-oriented' and 'action-oriented' because it is created for use in a practical human activity and not simply in response to an intellectual research question. There is now increasing pressure for HE curricula to include knowledge of this nature and to accept that the traditional modes of knowledge production are now being challenged. Yet, there are many academics, especially in the pre-92 Universities, who argue that the traditional view of academic knowledge needs to be preserved, at least to a certain extent, to allow for innovation and theory development. Academic knowledge must be seen to be more useful, relevant and responsive to external interests. Barnett & Coate (2005) argue that this change can be interpreted as either a shift towards the performative character of knowledge acquisition or, more encouragingly, as a shift from propositional knowledge towards an experiential knowing. Nevertheless, there is a real tension between an HE institution being a place to develop higher level learning or a place to gain a qualification for employment.

It is clear that the changing views about knowledge have influenced the form and character of curricula in HE. These changes are leading to valuations of knowledge that reject the predominance and privileging of academic knowledge in curricula, as evidenced by a trend in the growth of more vocationally and professionally oriented curricula. New conceptualisations of knowledge question the appropriateness of a traditional disciplined-based curriculum (Becher, 1994), particularly given the speed with which some knowledge becomes outdated and is replaced by new knowledge. The rise of mass HE and changing demands of industry have been sufficient to place pressure on our academic conceptions of knowledge and for HE to incorporate more practice-based areas. As a result, HE curricula are expanding the

boundaries of legitimate knowledge to include more practical and professional forms of knowledge.

Toohy (1999) and Savin-Baden (2000) also note the emergence of problem-based curricula that utilise elements of experiential learning *in situ* to develop knowledge through enquiries into 'real' problem. Indeed, problem-based learning has been introduced into education in many professional fields such as medicine, social work, management and engineering. The conceptual basis of knowledge in a problem-based curriculum is that knowledge is socially constructed in communities of practice and that learning involves an active process of reflection, investigation and professional dialogue.

This reconstruction or reorientation of knowledge has also facilitated new, legitimate sites of knowledge production and has led to the emergence of the notion of a 'knowledge society'. The rapid evolution of a 'knowledge society' driven in part by the development of powerful information and communication technologies recognises that new knowledge production is not confined solely to the academy and research organisations (Hager, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

Quinn (2006. p.151) argues that the HE institution 'of the twenty-first century deserves nothing less than a curriculum that responds to change and to the new knowers within it'. So what will the form, content and character of the HE curriculum be in the context of the new economics of HE, an increasingly competitive market place and at a time of imminent demographic change? Whilst difficult to predict, it is possible to say with some certainty that the HE curriculum will be affected by political and economic trends and student choices will have a dynamic impact on the future landscape of the HE curriculum. If the future 'customers' consider employability, career advancement and higher earning potential to be the most important deciding

factor in choosing their HEI and degree programme, then this may result in the further erosion of many well regarded low volume (and financially unviable) minority programmes and the rise in popularity of more vocational programmes. It will also be interesting to see whether a two-tiered approach develops within the sector with 'elite' universities charging £9,000 fees and offering more traditional academically-focused curricula for the high achieving students and cheaper more localised, vocational curricula being delivered by FECs, private providers and teaching-focused universities. Indeed, the desire by some of the more traditional research intensive universities not to compromise their credentials as 'world-class' research institutions and to successfully compete for AAB (or equivalent) students may well result in such universities attempting to preserve the intellectual liberalism of their curricula and resist the dictates of employability and professional accreditation. However, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills letter to HEFCE (28 June 2011) clearly indicates the Government's strategy to diversify the range of HE providers with statements such as, 'alternative providers are encouraged to offer a diverse range of higher education provision' and 'our aim is to create an open, dynamic and affordable higher education system, with more competition and innovation and a level playing field for new providers'. Certainly the decision to remove approximately 20,000 student numbers from across HE Institutions and to reallocate these to institutions charging average fees of £7,500 or less has resulted in more numbers being allocated to Further Education Colleges who typically provide for the needs of less traditional students and predominantly offer more vocationally focused provision, typically, although not exclusively, through Foundation degrees.

Understanding both the changing student profile and student expectations will become essential and a critical element in the shaping of an institution's academic portfolio, the setting of tuition fees and marketing

strategies. The balance between being driven by 'market forces' and maintaining integrity as institutions of higher learning appears to be tipping in favour of market forces, particularly in the newer, non-research intensive institutions. Given the current and seemingly ongoing political determination to reframe curricula in terms of economically productive skills linked to workforce development it is likely that the change in emphasis from traditional liberal education towards more utilitarian, vocational and functional curricula will continue and result in the emergence of more programmes focused on specific employment fields with an increasing trend to embed professional accreditation and industry endorsement. The demographic decline in the 18-20 age group, that produces the majority of full-time undergraduates will require institutions to diversify and offer curricula that are attractive to more mature students, part-time students, employers and to international students. A growth in what is currently perceived as 'non-standard' curricula could, therefore, be expected and lead to some fairly radical and innovative remodelling of curricula involving more flexible, personalised, work-based, distance, online, part-time and accelerated programme structures and modes of learning and delivery to both attract and accommodate the needs of these 'non-traditional' students. Similarly increases in UK collaborative provision are likely as new providers strive to enter the HE market with delivery capacity but without taught degree awarding powers. International collaborative provision, through dual awards, external validation and franchising arrangements may also be viewed by some institutions as a potential model for growth during a period where institutional home student numbers may be reducing. It is clear that the implications, challenges and potential incompatibilities and tensions for future curricula in the new era are significant and HEIs will need to respond for their future welfare and sustainability. The key question will be at what cost to learning and in whose interests?

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