



Designing transformative curricula: challenges and possibilities

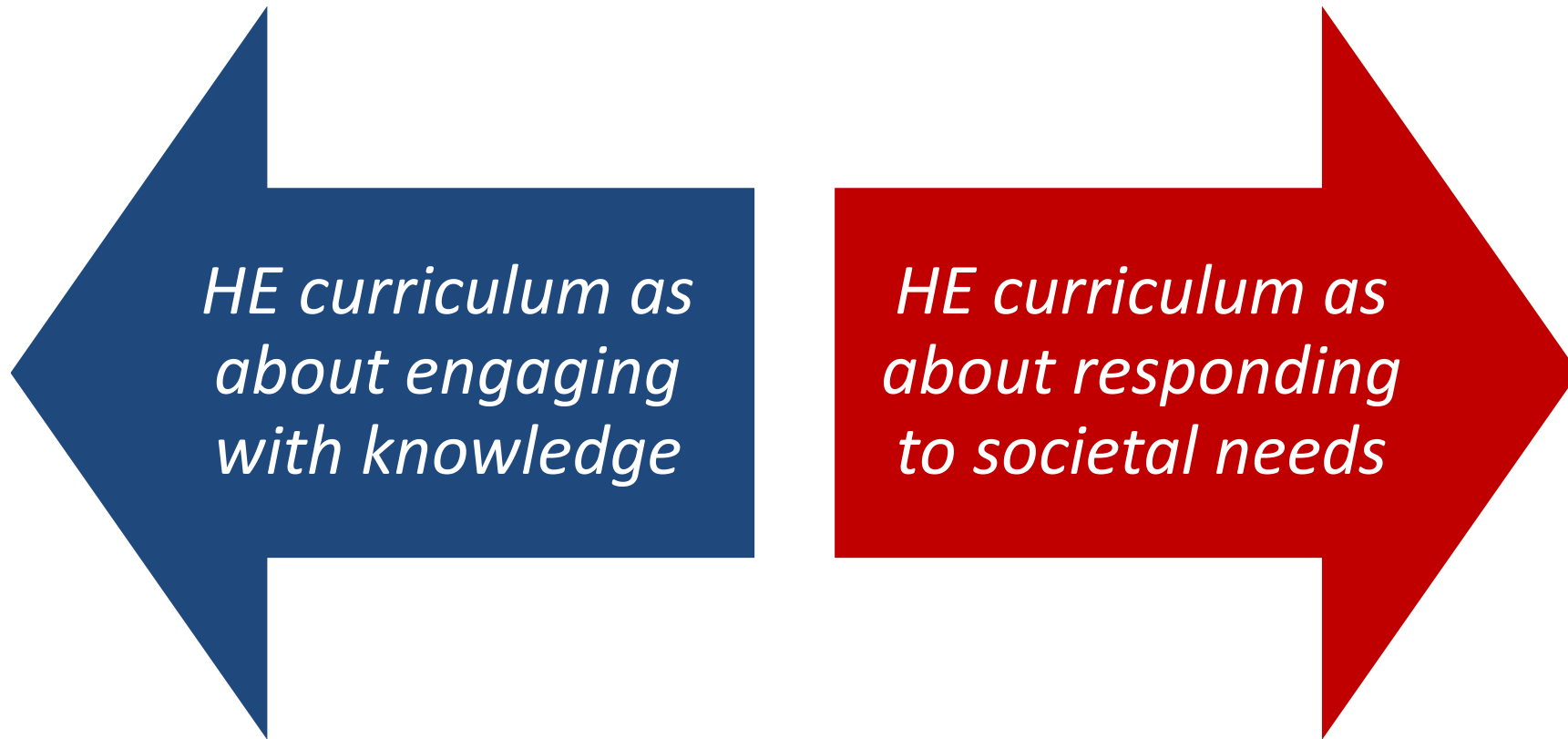
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Het curriculum in hoger onderwijs uitgedaagd – studievoormiddag,
VLOR, 'Vlaamse Onderwijsraad',
Brussels 18th April 2018

A tension in 'The curriculum in higher education challenged'



A possible future of the HE curriculum

Enhancing the employability of graduating students features significantly in the strategic agenda of higher education providers worldwide.

There has been a gradual shift in industry expectations of graduates from exhibiting academic expertise in a chosen discipline to a commercially aware candidate with a strong command of, and immediate ability to apply, a broad range of skills deemed essential in the workplace.

(Jackson 2014)

Future 1: The generic competencies curriculum

- The key purpose of higher education is to provide the next generation of professionals;
- This can best be approached by enabling students to develop the generic competencies that employers and society value;
- This will lead to both individual prosperity and economic development.

Problems with Future 1: The notion of generic competencies

- Just because we can describe a practice in terms of generic competencies, it does not mean that this is what actually at stake in this practice;
- We can describe the same practice in terms of as many generic competencies as we have the imagination to generate;
- Skilful practices are based on our knowledge, our understandings of particular tasks, our interactions with other people and things, and the setting we are in.

Problems with Future 1: The notion of curriculum

- Bernstein's (2000) notion of the 'pedagogic device' can be seen to relate to three versions of knowledge:
 - Knowledge-as-research;
 - Knowledge-as-curriculum;
 - Knowledge-as-student-understanding(see Ashwin 2014 for an exploration of these distinctions).
- Knowledge is transformed as it moves between these three forms.
- Emphasises the power struggles as knowledge is transformed into student understanding

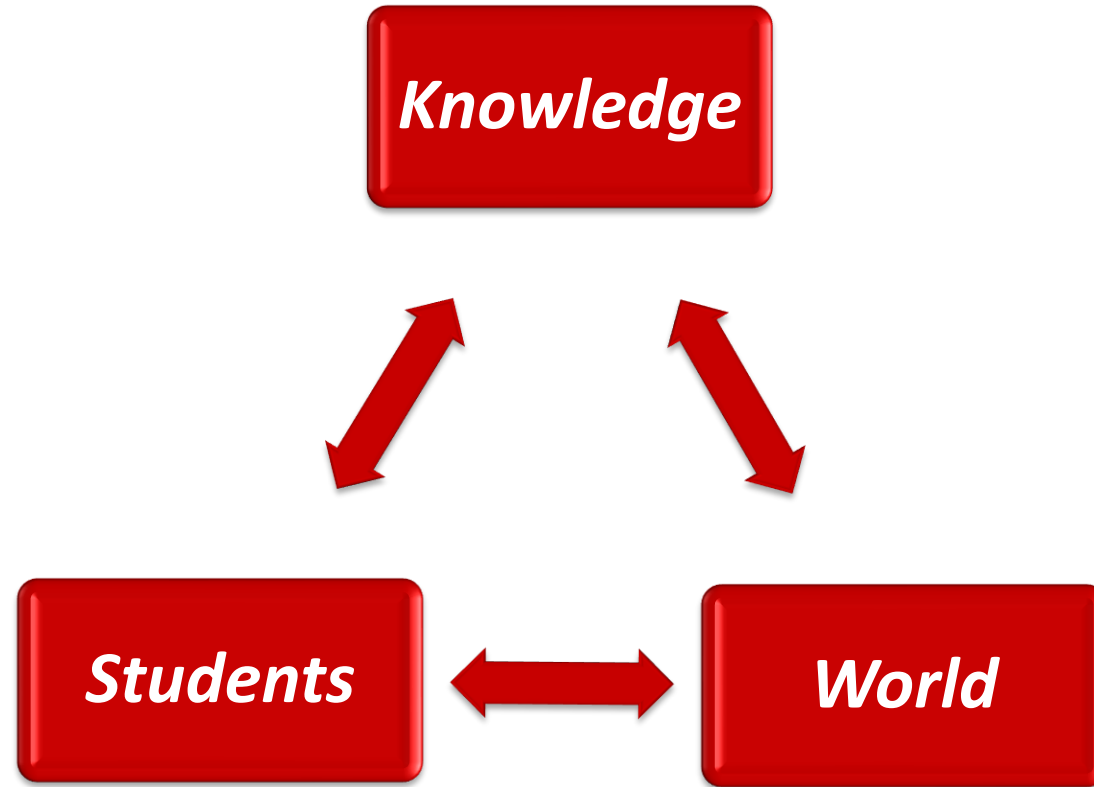
Future 2: A student and knowledge focused curriculum

- Teaching in higher education is about designing ways in which particular students can develop an understanding of particular bodies of disciplinary and/or professional knowledge (Ashwin et al. 2015 based on Shulman 1987).
- The transformational nature of undergraduate degrees lies in changes in students' sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge;
- Students relating their identities to their disciplines/professions and the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge;
- This does not always happen – it requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses and to see it as an educational experience. This is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience (Ashwin et al 2016)

There is no destination with this discipline...There is always something further and there is no point where you can stop and say 'I understood, I am a sociologist'. ... The thing is sociology makes you aware of every decision you make: how that would impact on my life and how it could impact on someone else. And it makes the decision harder to make (Esther, Selective, Year 3, Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project).

Discipline	Studies	Least inclusive Account	‘Watershed’ account	Most Inclusive account
Mathematics	Wood et al. 2012	Numbers	Models	Approach to life
Accountancy	Sin et al. 2012	Routine work	Meaningful work	Moral work
Law	Reid et al. 2006	Content	System	Extension of self
Music	Reid 2001	Instrument	Meaning	Communicating
Geography	Bradbeer et al. 2004	General world	Structured into parts	Interactions
Geoscience	Stokes 2011	Composition of earth	Interacting systems	Relations earth and society

The transformative power of higher education for students



Future 2: Implications for curriculum design

Ensuring that degree programmes are well designed and based on evidence-informed views of:

- who the students are;
- how and why the knowledge, which students are offered access to, is important and powerful; how it enables them to understand and change the world;
- who students will become through their engagement with this knowledge; how they will contribute to society including, but not limited to, their employment;

This is difficult, collective, intellectual work, which involves on-going dialogue and experimentation (Ashwin et al 2015).

Questions to support the design of curricula I

1. On what basis has knowledge been selected for inclusion in the curriculum? Who has had a say in selecting this knowledge?
2. What account has been taken of who the students are and what they know in designing the curriculum?
3. What new things will students be able to do because they have engaged with this knowledge?
4. How will those teaching the programme use their expertise to support students' engagement with these bodies of knowledge?

Questions to support the design of curricula II

5. How will other resources (including other students, teaching and learning interactions, readings, technologies) support this engagement?
6. How and why do is this engagement expected to lead to new ways of thinking for the students?
7. What evidence (from data on teaching practices, investigations of teaching practices, and the research literature) has informed the design of our degree programmes?

So what?

- Current approaches to curriculum design in HE tend to obscure the crucial roles played by :
 - Collective bodies of knowledge;
 - The collective transformation of these bodies of knowledge into usable material;
 - Contestation and power in shaping what is recognised as impact and who is seen as 'owning' it.
- This tends to put 'students' and 'knowledge' in a false opposition;
- We need to hold on to what is powerful about knowledge but work incredibly hard to make this accessible to a wider range of students.

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