Editorial

Curriculum: A neglected area in discourses on higher education

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is a complex and contested terrain that is variously described based on disparate philosophical lenses through which it is viewed. When the word curriculum is invoked it is generally understood as applying to school education, that is, to the prescribed learning programmes of schools or more broadly to the learning opportunities provided to school learners, rather than to higher education. A survey of articles published in prominent curriculum journals such as Journal of Curriculum Studies and Curriculum Inquiry, for instance, shows that very little space is given to articles on higher education. Ironically, the term was first used in relation to higher education rather than school education. It was the sixteenth century master at the University of Paris, Ramus who first worked on ‘methodizing’ knowledge and teaching. It was in Ramus’s work, a taxonomy of knowledge, the Professio Regia (1576), which was published posthumously, that the word curriculum first appears, referring to ‘a sequential course of study’ (for more detail see Doll 2002, 31). According to Doll (2002, 31), Ramus’s idea of a general codification of knowledge (curriculum) flourished among universities that were strongly influenced by Calvinism ostensibly because of their affinity for discipline, order and control.

Our understanding of curriculum has (r)evolved since early conceptions of the 16th century. For the purpose of our discussion here, curriculum simply refers to what knowledge is included or excluded in university learning/teaching courses. In this editorial I argue that curriculum is a neglected area in higher education discourses generally and in South Africa more specifically, and further suggest some important curriculum issues that should be considered by higher education policy makers and institutions in South Africa.

CURRICULUM A NEGLECTED TERRAIN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In South Africa we have witnessed considerable change in the higher education
landscape in recent years. Changes include: a proliferation of policies (focusing mainly on governance, funding, quality assurance and student access and success); the merging of institutions; institutional changes (such as the introduction of strategic plans, quality assurance directorates, equity plans). Presumably all of these are important, but the changes have not incorporated much talk about the implications for curriculum and perhaps more importantly, curriculum has not featured as a central concern of higher education transformation in South Africa. This situation does not seem to be peculiar to South Africa. As Barnett and Coate (2005, 1) write:

All around the world, higher education is expanding rapidly, governments are mounting inquiries into higher education, more institutions are involved in running courses of study and more money is being spent on higher education, not least by students themselves. Higher education is ever more important to increasing numbers of people. And yet, despite the growth and debate, there is very little talk about the curriculum. What students should be experiencing is barely a topic for debate. What the building blocks of their courses might be and how they should be put together are even more absent from the general discussion. The very idea of curriculum is pretty well missing altogether.

In the United Kingdom, the term curriculum does not appear in the index of the report of the UK’s most recent National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE 1997) nor is there any mention of ‘curriculum’ in the UK’s White Paper on The Future of Higher Education of 2003 (see Barnett and Coate 2005, 13).

In South Africa the situation is a little better because the term curriculum is alluded to in some of the important policy documents on higher education. For example, Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE 1997) does make reference to the term curriculum in places. I shall refer to three instances where the term is mentioned. It is mentioned under the headings institutional autonomy, public accountability and programme-based approach. According to the White Paper the principle of institutional autonomy refers to a high degree of self-regulation concerning matters such as student admissions, curriculum, methods of teaching and assessment, and so on. Under public accountability, the White Paper suggests that higher education curricula should be responsive to the national and regional context. The White Paper proposes that a programme-based approach would promote the diversification of access, curriculum and qualification structure.

While I do not question the idea of universities enjoying self-regulation on matters such as curriculum, there is a danger when curriculum becomes a private domain, that is when self-regulation in practice means that individual lecturers alone determine what is taught in the courses/modules they present. We can debate how widespread such practices are, but the point is that they do occur. If increased
and broadened participation, as stated in *Education White Paper 3*, is central to the transformation of the South African higher education system and its institutions, then curricula of institutions should be sensitive to the needs of particularly black, women and disabled students. Although we have witnessed increased access to students in the mentioned categories, at most institutions it is questionable as to whether access has shifted beyond formal access to include epistemological access. To achieve the latter, development of gender and culturally inclusive curricula is crucial. One reason why scant attention is given to curriculum concerns in higher education discourses may be the fact that something such as a national curriculum framework (as in the case with schools) does not exist. Let me immediately say that I am not suggesting that we should have national curriculum frameworks for higher education. It simply is not possible or desirable. However, I wish to suggest that higher education curriculum matters should be more critically debated in the public sphere – that it should not narrowly be the concern of individual or groups of lecturers located in their institutions. The *South African Journal of Higher Education* could serve as one vehicle for fostering and advancing much needed ‘curriculum talk’. At this juncture, it is appropriate to move onto Education White Paper 3’s reference to curriculum under the heading public accountability.

As mentioned, reference is made to curriculum under public accountability in *Education White Paper 3*, and specifically that higher education curricula should be responsive to the national and regional context. I would like to broaden this further by speaking of responsiveness to the African context. The number of international students at South African universities has increased significantly over the past few years. At Stellenbosch University, for example, there are more than two thousand international students, many from African countries. International students bring benefits to South African universities in many ways, one of these being that they provide an important source of income to universities. But, the question that must be answered is to what extent curricula at South African universities have changed to accommodate a diverse student corps.

An even more fundamental question in whether the curricula of South African universities reflect the context in which they are located. I am not suggesting that curricula of South African universities should narrowly reflect mainly local content. It goes without saying that South African universities should contribute to the production and ‘transmission’ of an international body of knowledge. However, Mahmood Mamdani’s experience raises a very important point. At the last biennial conference of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (SAARDHE), Mamdani shared that when he was appointed at the University of Cape Town (UCT) a few years ago, he found to his astonishment that the university had a Centre for African Studies. He wondered what kind of studies were taking place elsewhere in the university. When UCT markets itself as an African University (and it does), what does this mean? Is this idea reflected in the institution’s curricula? For example, is a growing body of literature on African philosophy reflected in ‘mainstream’ philosophy courses or is
it the business of a Centre for African Studies or something similar to teach it? These are important but neglected matters in higher education debates in South Africa. They are as important, if not more important than matters such as governance, funding and quality assurance. But, let me now turn to implications of a programme-based approach for curriculum.

In the middle to late 1990s there was much debate in South Africa about an emerging new mode of knowledge production (Mode 2) – much of the debate is captured in a book edited by Kraak (2000a). Gibbons et al. (1994) and Scott (1995) argue that we are witnessing a shift from disciplinary science (Mode 1) to a new mode of knowledge production that is trans-disciplinary, trans-institutional and heterogeneous. Protagonists of the Mode 2 thesis argue that this new mode of knowledge production is an outcome of two powerful social forces, namely, globalisation and the democratisation of access to higher education (for more detail see Kraak 2000b). Gibbons (2000, 41) elaborates on the effects of democratization by pointing out that with the massification of higher education the number of graduates has become too large to be absorbed into the disciplinary structure of academic life. The Mode 2 thesis of Gibbons et al. (1994) and Scott (1995) influenced post-apartheid South African higher education policy significantly, in particular the following policy texts: the final report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), entitled *A Framework for Transformation* (1996); the Department of Education’s *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* (DoE 1996); the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (DoE 1997); and the *Higher Education Act* of 1997. One of the influences that Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 knowledge debate (flowing out of mentioned documents) has had on higher education in South Africa is the introduction of a programme-based approach to teaching in place of more disciplinary structured offerings. Although there has been extensive debate on Mode 1 and Mode 2 thinking from a research perspective, that is, in relation to knowledge production, there has been very little attention in South Africa to the implications of a programme-based teaching approach for curriculum development and design. It is important that these be explored. In many cases, as is the case in the faculty where I work, programmes are designed across disciplines and departments. The modules which constitute a particular programme are located in different departments. This leads to tension concerning what drives changes to a programme. Traditionally, it is within disciplines that ‘new’ knowledge is produced – that disciplines are renewed through research not programmes. ‘New’ disciplinary knowledge is shared/transmitted in modules which are located in academic departments. Changes to modules informed by ‘new’ disciplinary knowledge may be in tension with the aims, direction and vision of a teaching programme. Ideally, the renewal of a programme should be a synergy of changes happening at the module level (information by new thinking in disciplines) and changes at programme level, such as whether the programme caters for the needs of black, women and disabled students. As yet we know very little about how the
tension described manifests itself in different programmes at universities and whether it is experienced differently in SET (Science Engineering and Technology) in comparison to Human and Social Sciences programmes, for example. Critical reflections on some the implications of a programme-based approach for curriculum design and development is crucial at this point in time in South Africa.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO?

Curriculum is a neglected area in discourses on higher education. I have pointed out three areas that present particular challenges for curriculum in higher education and which also provide opportunities for setting the matter right (i.e. the neglect of curriculum matters in higher education) in the South African context. The following may be useful places to begin:

- Higher education institutions could begin to develop approaches to curricula that are gender and culturally more inclusive in all areas of specializations they offer.
- Criteria for reviewing all modules and programmes at higher education institutions should include one that focus on whether the module/programme takes into account gender and cultural inclusiveness.
- Research could be conducted and reported on tensions experienced with a programme-based approach to teaching.

Finally, it might be useful to begin viewing all activities which occur at higher education institutions through a ‘curriculum lens’. In other words, to ask what implications different activities/debates have for higher education curricula – how they impact on students’ current experiences and how students’ experiences might be different. Reading the articles in this issue of the journal through a ‘curriculum lens’ might be a helpful start. Beyond what each article reports that is of intrinsic value, you might consider what implications matters of access, identities in transition, knowledge production, academic support, attitudes, perceptions and knowledge of HIV/AIDS, learning environments and simulations have for curriculum and how we may imagine it differently. Do any of the articles say anything new about what knowledge to include or exclude in higher education in contemporary South Africa? My discussion here serves to open up an important but neglected debate that I hope will be taken up in future issues of SAJHE.

NOTE

1 Stellenbosch University, for example, is still struggling to provide formal access to black students. The small percentage of black students is dwindling further.
REFERENCES


DoE see Department of Education


