



“What I wish I’d known at the start”

Insights from leaders of seven curriculum transformation projects

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About the project



Curriculum reform is not just redesign—it's institutional transformation under pressure



HE as a contested space: financial pressure, regulation, employability, AI, student expectations



Curriculum reform is a very common response – what's different about the current moment is the scale (institutional and strategic, rather than ad hoc and programme-level)



Our project: **7 institutions + a shared challenge → shared learning**



Why Curriculum Transformation Matters

Curriculum reform is increasing across the UK HE sector. Institutions face pressures linked to:

- financial sustainability
- student experience
- employability
- graduate outcomes
- flexibility and interdisciplinarity

Transformation programmes are complex, sensitive and high impact. Many universities are navigating similar challenges simultaneously.



Curriculum reform: a whole community approach

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project



The Project Partners



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Stages of Delivery

Discovery:

Salford, SOAS

Implementation:

Newcastle, Exeter

Evaluation and Review:

Reading, Bristol, Leeds

Project Aim: What if we treat curriculum reform as shared sector challenge, not isolated institutional work?

Project Outputs

1. Develop a Community of Practice

- Senior Leader Insights
- Student Perspectives
- Cross Institutional Practice-Sharing (the good, the bad, and the ugly!).

2. Sector-Facing Tools to Support Community Engagement in Curriculum Reform

Project report with sector insights

Engagement toolkit, workshop templates, case studies..

3. Student Engagement and Co-creation

Working alongside student interns, as well as sabbatical officers.





We hired two undergraduate Collaborative Enhancement Project Assistants, to co-create resources aimed at supporting the sector to lead meaningful change.

They created:

- A guide to what works in ‘whole community’ consultation
- A shareable ‘your transformation project on a side’ template
- A guide to sustainable curriculum including field trips
- Case studies, quotes and insights included in the project report drawn from interviews with project partners
- Insights from a survey of staff and student leaders, that inform a conversation on ‘what I wish I’d known before leading curriculum change’ at the QAA Conference on 9th July, 2026.
- A workshop template and facilitator guide to help departments/institutions sustain momentum in curriculum transformation.



Insight Gathering



Anonymous reflections from **staff and student leaders** involved in curriculum transformation



Institutions at different stages of reform



Responses captured practical lessons, challenges, and recommendations



Focus on lived experience rather than theoretical models

- Our Collaborative Enhancement Project Assistant gathered insights via a self-designed survey
- Leaders across our 7 institutional change programmes shared their insights anonymously.



Key Themes Across our 7 Institutions



Start consultation early



Different stakeholders require different engagement approaches



Curriculum reform is also **culture change**



Strong project management matters



Evaluation planning is often underestimated



Communication and continuity are critical

1. Start Consultation Earlier Than You Think

Why it Matters

External discussions were less effective when participants lacked sufficient context or evidence to respond to

Key Considerations

- Make it meaningful: Begin consultation before proposals are fixed
- Gather feedback as part of discovery activity
- Use evidence to frame discussions – academics expect ‘evidence!’

Reflections

“Market research and internal engagement should begin during the discovery phase”

“Give colleagues and students a chance to feed in early, and show through clear communications and updates how their ideas have contributed to the change programme.”

“The discovery phase proved far more important than anticipated. It was not simply a preparatory step, but a critical part of the transformation process”



2. Different Stakeholders Need Different Engagement Formats

Why it Matters

Using a generic or 'one off' consultation structure risks engagement quality.

Key Considerations

- Use segmented stakeholder groups
- Tailor communication styles
- Combine formal and informal engagement methods: market research surveys, stakeholder panels, workshops,

Reflections

“Tailored stakeholder groups enabled more focused discussion.”

“Having the real volume of consultative panels and surveys to back you, as well as student stories, transforms conversations entirely and can shift the dials”

“My best advice is to fully embrace partnership... you are working alongside passionate individuals who often want the very same outcomes”.



3. Curriculum Reform is Also Culture Change

Why it Matters

Staff ownership and trust strongly influenced implementation success..

Reflections

“Curriculum transformation is about culture change, participation, and ownership.”

“Managing change with people was the most important part of the process – important aspects were academic and disciplinary identity”.

Key Considerations

- Build shared ownership early
- Communicate consistently - don't underestimate the value of comms input to the project
- Involve staff and students throughout – it's an ongoing dialogue



4. Strong Project Infrastructure is Important

Why it Matters

Institutions repeatedly highlighted governance, coordination, and project support as critical success factors.

Key Considerations

- Maintain clear governance structures
- Use regular coordination meetings to trouble-shoot and iterate in response to feedback
- Build realistic timelines

Reflections

“Excellent project support ensured we were well prepared.”

“We started planning in 2019–20 and were quickly overtaken by Covid! And the advent of generative AI was also rather unpredicted. The learning from this is perhaps that curriculum transformation schemes need to be open to unforeseeable change”

“The support offer changed significantly over time... colleagues found the volume of material overwhelming... so the information was edited and released in phases”



5. Design Evaluation Early

Why it Matters

Without baseline measures, long-term impact became difficult to assess.

Key Considerations

- Design Success Measures Early
- Establish baseline data
- Agree how evaluation will work
- Monitor impact over time
- Consider how you will move the out of 'project mode' and into BAU

Reflections

"Designing in evaluation from the start is much easier."

"We are still in the evaluation and monitoring phase—it is important to emphasise from the start that some benefits will take time to realise."

"Ideally, we wouldn't do curriculum transformation as a one-off project but have a rolling "programme"..."



Student Leader Insights

Student voice matters

Students felt their lived experience added valuable perspective to curriculum change discussions and decision-making.

University systems can feel complex at first

Many leaders highlighted that understanding institutional structures, governance, and stakeholder roles took time.

Collaboration is essential

Strong communication and supportive staff partnerships were repeatedly identified as critical to success.

Confidence develops through involvement

Student leaders encouraged future participants to speak up early and trust the value of their perspective.

Reflections

“Find your allies in the university that align with your values and goals.”

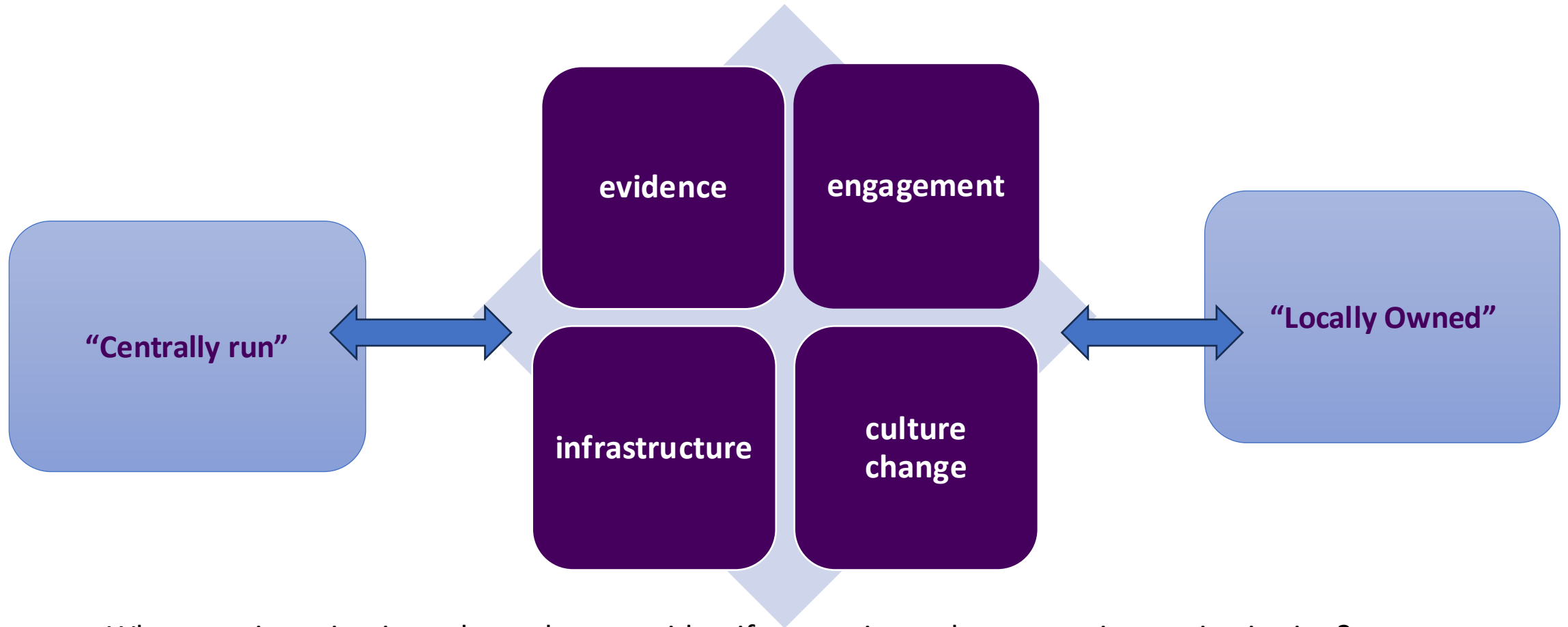
“Don’t be afraid to challenge and share the student perspective, that is why you are there.”

Key Considerations

Successful curriculum transformation relies on:

- meaningful student partnership,
- open communication,
- creating environments where student leaders feel empowered to contribute confidently.

Generating momentum in transformation



- What practice exists in each quadrant can identify synergies and spot gaps in your institution?
- Creating links between each of the four quadrants can help develop a 'virtuous circle'.

Final Reflections

Curriculum transformation extends beyond programme redesign and implementation planning.

Sustained engagement, clear communication, and shared ownership shape the success of institutional change initiatives.

Across institutions, leaders consistently emphasised the importance of building trust, maintaining momentum, and creating structures that support long-term change over time.

Final thoughts: how can universities adapt a 'co-opetition model' to embrace partnership thinking in curriculum innovation and change?





**September: watch out for
our project report**

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Thank you

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