



Curriculum Reform: A Whole Community Approach



Curriculum reform: a whole
community approach

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project



University
of Exeter



University of
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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



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Acknowledgements

The project team are indebted to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education for funding the project through their Collaborative Enhancement Scheme, and to the colleagues at the QAA who supported the project with their time and energy.

We are also sincerely thankful to the many colleagues who engaged with the project by attending online and in-person events, and to those in our partner institutions who gave up their time to share their insights on curriculum change. Special thanks go to **Cynthia Heiner**, for her inspiring keynote at our first in-person event, and for continuing to be a friend to this project and a powerful advocate for inclusive, community-led transformation.

The resources developed as part of the project were a genuine community endeavour! Thank you to our contributors:

- Dr. Hannah Bargawi, Director of Global Learning and Teaching and Reader in Economics, SOAS
- Dr. Carlo Bonura, Reader in Politics and International Relations, SOAS
- Professor Nicky Thomas, Associate Professor of Accounting and Tax Education, University of Exeter
- Emma Norman, Learning and Pilots Manager, University of Exeter.
- Dr Alison Williams and Michelle Black, Leading Edge Curriculum Leads, Newcastle University
- Dr Nina Brooke, Academic Developer, University of Reading
- Beth Curtis and Hannah Petrie, Portfolio Officers, University of Exeter
- Kiran Clarke, Isabella McComish and Chris Wong, University of Exeter Undergraduates
- Davina Whitnall, HE consultant, formerly at University of Salford

Many thanks to our student/sabbatical officer panellists:

- Dr Pouria Rafati, University of Salford
- Francis Steptoe, University of Exeter Students' Union Vice President Education
- Sebastian Racisz, University of Exeter Students' Union President.

We'd also like to extend our gratitude to **Rose Blackburn** and **Alina Hamova**, our Undergraduate Project Assistants, who balanced studying alongside developing student-led insights on curriculum change for our toolkit, and who helped to make this project genuinely informed and co-created by students. Finally, we're grateful to the student leaders and colleagues, who have worked alongside each of us in delivering change programmes in, and beyond, their home institutions, which will benefit thousands of students in the years to come.

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1. Introduction

Across the sector, institutions are embarking on – or are considering – wide-scale programme and curricular reform. These changes are driven not only by financial pressures but also by a growing demand for inclusive teaching and learning, and for graduates who are ready to thrive in the workplace.

The current financial climate and post-pandemic context make this a challenging time for universities to undertake large-scale institutional change. Strategic curriculum reform can sometimes feel imposed or done to staff and students rather than done with them. Proposals aimed at fostering interdisciplinarity, improving consistency in student experience, and enhancing skills development can also raise concerns about the preservation of disciplinary identities and academic freedom. This 'contested space' (Shay, 2015) has been the backdrop and motivation for our QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project.

The project is led by senior academic and professional services colleagues at the **University of Exeter**, in partnership with their counterparts at the Universities of **Bristol**, **Leeds**, **Newcastle**, **Reading**, **SOAS**, and **Salford**. We have been joined by two Collaborative Enhancement Project Student Assistants, who have worked to translate the findings of the report into shareable outputs. This diversity has offered a rich opportunity to reflect on, and evaluate, curricular reform from multiple perspectives – whether starting out, delivering change, or reviewing impact. These insights have shaped the development of project events and resources and are vital to understanding the full lifecycle of whole-institution curriculum review.

This report summarises the activity undertaken through the project and highlights key findings around the common drivers, enablers and challenges associated with driving curriculum transformation at an institutional level. It sets out several case examples, drawn from the experiences of project partners in different areas of change, and provides recommendations and resources that will support the sector in responding at pace to changing market, financial and regulatory contexts.



Image 1. Project Logo

1.1 Project Aims and Outputs

Community of Practice

A key aim of the project was to bring together a group of colleagues from across England who are undertaking curriculum reform programmes, or interested in doing so. We sought to build a community of practice that could share insights on leading strategic curriculum change, and work together on establishing good practice on stakeholder consultation, evaluation and other common themes.

This community of practice emerged through three planned collaborative events which offered colleagues opportunities to network, share ideas, and identify potential partners in innovation, as well as outreach work, presenting at other events. The timeline of outreach activity is included in Section 8 of this report.

Tools to support Community Engagement in Curriculum Transformation

We also sought to jointly develop tools and resources that could be used more widely across the sector, to support co-creation with students in curriculum change, as well as facilitate wider consultation and engagement on approaches to curriculum transformation.

Student Co-Created Outputs

We recognised, in developing the project, that student voice is central to successful and authentic curriculum transformation and proposed student-led outputs as part of the funding request. To support this work:

- We hosted a student panel as part of our in-person symposium, bringing students together from Salford and Exeter to share their stories of student engagement and being part of an institutional curriculum change project.
- We hired two undergraduate Collaborative Enhancement Project Assistants, to co-create resources aimed at supporting the sector to lead meaningful change. These resources are shared on the QAA website alongside the project report.

They include:

- 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 this 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 Connect Event on 9th July, 2026.
- A workshop template and facilitator guide to help departments/institutions sustain momentum in curriculum transformation.

“

I joined the project because I am interested in how structured stakeholder engagement can improve decision-making and support positive institutional change. I contributed to the development of the stakeholder consultation toolkit by translating findings from the University of Exeter’s curriculum reform programme and insights from an interview with the lead responsible for stakeholder consultation into a clear, practical framework. Alongside this, I developed a “What I Wish I’d Known” presentation based on senior leader feedback and refined an existing mapping workshop tool into a structured facilitation guide, strengthening my ability to turn qualitative insights into practical, usable outputs.”

Alina Hamova, Stage 2 Undergraduate



“

I applied to be a CEP assistant to gain experience in research, design and project management and it's safe to say that my expectations were exceeded by this role. I particularly enjoyed conducting interviews and learning how to use these notes to develop a range of resources to aid other universities. Everyone I have worked with has been very supportive and engaged with the project and I feel I have learnt a great deal through this project that I can continue to use in my degree and beyond.

Rose Blackburn, Stage 1 Undergraduate

”

2. The Context: What's driving Curriculum Reform in UK Higher Education?

Curriculum change is not a recent introduction to the HE landscape. Universities have long evolved their programmes to address research and teaching innovations, changes in market demand and student numbers, and to meet new regulatory expectations and quality enhancement agendas.

What has more recently changed is the strategic coordination of curriculum transformation at an institutional level, with an aim to develop more consistency in delivery across faculties or schools. Blackmore and Kandiko (2012) draw attention to the emergence of league tables and global rankings as an early driver for this activity, resulting in a competitive climate in Higher Education that requires institutions to position themselves distinctively.

Earlier approaches to curriculum transformation had largely been driven by disciplinary and departmental contexts. Louvel (2013) presents curriculum change as bricolage, a creative act in which educators identify the resources available to them and assemble those resources in unique ways, informed by local disciplinary logics and pedagogies (Shay 2015). This results in localised good practice and developed strong disciplinary pedagogic expectations, but can cause growing programme complexity and variety, potentially at odds with a strong university 'brand'. Our project uncovered differences *within* institutions in, for example, modularisation, module credit size, assessment burden and contact hours.

The project has identified seven key themes that were common in shaping a more centralised approach to curriculum transformation. These are listed and discussed in more detail below.

1. Regulatory and Political Change

2. The Coronavirus Pandemic

3. Skills and Employability

4. Financial Pressure

5. Public and Media Scrutiny

6. Technological Disruption

7. The Changing Student Demographic

Fig 2.1 Common drivers of Curriculum Reform

2.1 Regulatory and Political Change

The past decade has brought significant regulatory and political upheaval, including the Brexit referendum, six prime ministers, ten secretaries for education, and five universities ministers (at time of writing). The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) brought in a new regulatory context for universities, setting up the Office for Students (OfS), and instigating conditions of registration for universities to protect the experience of students of all backgrounds across access and participation, quality and standards, student outcomes, students' consumer interests, institutional governance, financial sustainability and fee/funding accountability.

Combined with the need to present a coherent institutional narrative on student experience and outcomes in the form of a Teaching Excellence

Framework submission, these conditions now create the circumstances for universities to establish institutional quality cultures, with consistent expectations across all their programmes. Universities are now also subject to stronger Competitions and Markets Authority guidance (2023) with enforcement powers enacted into law that protect students' rights as consumers. Ensuring students receive accurate marketing and promotional materials about their programmes at point of application can make programme changes more complex and arguably slower to deliver and requiring more consistent guidance from university legal teams.

2.2 The Coronavirus pandemic

Covid brought to light the institutional risks and challenges associated with idiosyncratic design and delivery. A complex, varied curriculum made it harder for some universities to pivot to online learning and assessment. However, this disruption required institution-wide transformation (Scholkmann, Olsen and Wolscheid, 2024) and caused many institutions to create shared design principles underpinning new, albeit temporary, models of education delivery and assessment. Covid was a springboard for curriculum

transformation beyond technological innovation; it also demonstrated that universities could innovate, at scale, and at pace, to support the changing needs of students and the wider community (Treve, 2021). Universities have been working to ensure that positive benefits in student outcomes that resulted from, for example, more inclusive assessment practices are not lost following a return to in person teaching and assessment (Universities UK, 2022).

2.3 Skills and Employability

More recently, the UK Government's new Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade, 2025), in connection with Skills England, seeks to identify skills gaps and align training and education with priority industry sectors. The proposals explicitly offer universities an important capacity-building role, developing graduates with the skills required to enter eight industries prioritised for investment by government.

At an international level, similar recommendations have emerged. The Office for Economic Co-Operation

and Development (OECD)'s Higher Education Policy programme emphasises the significance of universities in helping societies respond to 'digital and sustainable transitions' by upskilling labour markets through redesigned curricula and microcredentials that support lifelong learning (Golden and Broberg, 2024). As a result, many institutions are exploring how to embed skills and employability directly into the curriculum and ensure students can explain how their degree has contributed to their professional development.

2.4 Financial Pressure

The factors causing increasing financial pressure on UK universities are well established. According to Roper and Vorley (2025) they include:

- the decline in real-terms value of domestic tuition fees,
- significant declines in international student visa applications following a change in graduate visa policy and on the ability for dependants to secure visas, resulting in a downward trend in international student recruitment for many HEIs
- rising operational costs from inflation, pension contributions and salary increases

The OfS (2025) reports that nearly half of universities are predicted to post a deficit in 2025-26, and interviews with 74 financial leaders in UK universities indicate that over 97 % of participants recognise this as a 'structural, long-term problem' (Roper and Vorley, 2025). A similar, challenging financial picture is emerging internationally (OECD, 2025). As a result, institutions must work to ensure that all their programmes are attractive to students and have broad market appeal, and delivered both to a high quality, and as efficiently as possible within the tuition fee envelope.

2.5 Public and Media Scrutiny

Higher Education Institutions are experiencing growing public and media scrutiny about their role in civic, social and economic life (Hillman and Duffy, 2025). Universities, academics and students are referenced in discussions about immigration (Tsouroufli and Ferri, 2025), 'culture wars' and freedom of speech (with the latter now regulated through its own condition of registration) (Ryan 2024). Political and media

narratives, along with public perception, increasingly associate value for money explicitly with graduate outcomes and employability instead of academic reputation and disciplinary mastery. Alongside policies that position universities as key players in upskilling labour forces, these narratives are driving curriculum changes to tackle employability.

2.6 Technological Disruption

The pandemic caused a global shift in curriculum design, requiring all UK Higher Education institutions to deliver programmes remotely (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2021). Growing recognition of the opportunities offered by, and markets that could be accessed by blended and/or flexible delivery resulted in a surge of online programmes. Government ambition further encourages flexible modular delivery through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, a new funding model which aims to support 'step on, step off' access to Higher Education curricula for learners from January 2027 (Department for Education, 2025).

The rise of generative artificial intelligence and machine learning is also creating new opportunities to embed personalised, data-powered learning across programmes (Abbasi, Wu and Luo, 2025). These opportunities can only be grasped if universities organise their response to technological change at an institutional level, rolling out pilot initiatives, and developing policies to support e.g. robust assessment design and/or consistent and responsible of learning analytics.

2.7 A Changing Student Demographic

Finally, providers are looking to enhance their curricula to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. The most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Bulletin shows that in 2023-24, the number of disabled students attending university had increased annually since 2019-20, with a significant proportion disclosing specific learning disabilities or mental health conditions. The cohort is also getting older, with the proportion of students aged 30 and over enrolling on a degree for the first time growing from 11% to 15% from 2019-20 to 2023-24 (ibid). And between 40% (Kenyon, 2024) and 55% (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) of students are 'commuters' who choose to stay local while attending university, challenging the stereotype that students relocate away from 'home' to attend university. Expectations are also shifting around pastoral and wellbeing support for students, with universities seeking to implement the 2024 recommendations emerging from the Abrahart Case (EHRC 2024) and principles of the University Mental Health Charter.

Diversification also emerges in relation to students' academic background. The Office for Students' (2023) conditions of registration require universities to create fair and accessible student journeys through

higher education. At the University of Exeter, degree apprenticeships have made university education more widely available to those may not have a traditional academic background, but who qualify for a degree apprenticeship based on their employment experience and the recommendation of their employer (University of Exeter, 2024). And at the University of Salford, over 50% of undergraduates have a BTEC background, rather than A levels. Despite this fact, BTEC students at Salford believed themselves to be in the minority within the student body (Power and Whitnall 2025).

Retrofitting curricula designed for white, able bodied, residential students aged 18-21 is increasingly expensive, and evidence indicates that accessible learning design benefits all students, not just those who need reasonable adjustments (Hubbard and Gawthorpe, 2024). Universities are using institution wide curriculum transformation processes to embed principles that meet the needs of a diverse student body, rather than building in adjustments post-hoc. Examples include setting expectations around inclusive assessment as was undertaken at Salford, or designing curricula based on the Principles of Universal Design for Learning, as was undertaken at Exeter (Fornauf and Erikson 2020).

2.8 Into the future

These recent shifts in the landscape of higher education have resulted in a growing trend to address curriculum transformation at a strategic level. This Collaborative Enhancement Project has revealed that despite their apparent status as competitors, UK universities can collaborate across their own individual transformation programmes, sharing contextual insights, practice and outcomes in ways that help to address the sustainability of the sector as a whole and enhance the reputation of UK universities to deliver outstanding education in increasingly challenging circumstances.

New collaboration opportunities are continuing to emerge, to support modular delivery through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (currently due to roll out in January 2027) and to realise further efficiencies. The Universities UK Transformation and Efficiency Task Force (Universities UK, 2025) has identified several such opportunities including sharing operational

services and infrastructure, working together to establish sector buying power, and partnering on digital transformation projects.

The common themes indicate that curriculum transformation is not solely about redesign, although pedagogy is front and centre within all our projects. The work is also about institutional transformation under pressure. In this context, our project explored what it would mean to engage with curriculum transformation as a shared sector challenge rather than as work undertaken in institutional silos. We found ourselves asking whether curriculum transformation activity will develop across, as well as within universities, and how collaboration built on practice-sharing could help the sector transform more quickly and with greater resilience.



3. Our Seven Institutional Curriculum Transformation Projects

The seven partners in our Collaborative Enhancement Project are each delivering a major curriculum transformation programme at their institutions. Across the team, there is a spread across all three phases of delivery: discovery, implementation and evaluation. More detail can be found about the projects below, followed by a summary and comparison table.



Fig. 4.1 Our seven curriculum reform programmes

3.1 Programmes in Discovery

School of Oriental and African Studies – Curriculum for Success

SOAS is undertaking a comprehensive rationalisation of its programme portfolio to improve efficiency and enhance the student experience. The project aims to create a sustainable curriculum model supported by a common framework and streamlined assessment processes. A key feature is the introduction of a new academic calendar, designed to provide coherence and flexibility. Delivery is phased, with a review of the 'size and shape' of the portfolio scheduled for 2025/26 and evaluation from 2026 onwards, while the calendar reform moves from discovery in 2024/25 to implementation in September 2025.

University of Salford – Education Delivery Plan

Salford's initiative focuses on enhancing student engagement and academic outcomes through Active Blended Learning (ABL). The project seeks to consolidate best practice, establish evidence-based models, and embed inclusive approaches that prepare graduates for future challenges. The discovery phase began in April 2025, followed by workstream development in July 2025. Full implementation is planned for September 2026, with evaluation continuing from 2027 onwards.

3.2 Programmes in Delivery

University of Exeter – Curriculum for Change

Exeter's programme aims to optimise student experience and employability while supporting wellbeing and reducing complexity in the undergraduate portfolio. Key strands include: a programme portfolio review underpinned by new teaching and assessment principles, a skills framework, initiatives to support student transition and belonging, efforts to focus on reducing the peaks and troughs of assessment burden for staff and students, and an emphasis on experiential and work-related learning across all programmes. Discovery took place during 2023–24, with implementation commencing from 2025–26 and evaluation beginning from 2026 onwards.

Newcastle University – Leading Edge Curriculum

Newcastle is embedding a universal curriculum framework that reflects institutional values, promotes inclusivity, and prioritises career outcomes. The approach harmonises structures and supports pedagogic innovation across disciplines. Workstreams address programme structures, learning and assessment design, and skills for lifelong learning. Delivery spans discovery (2023–24), development (2024–25), and implementation from 2025–26.

3.3 Programmes in Evaluation

University of Reading – Portfolio Review

Reading's project enhances student experience and wellbeing while creating a coherent, sustainable portfolio. It addresses staff workload and resource efficiency through programme and module review, restructuring the academic year, and redesigning provision against core principles. The initiative began with an initiation phase in 2020, followed by proposal development (2021–22), implementation (2022–23), and pre-launch activities in 2023–24. Full launch occurred in 2024–25, with evaluation and business-as-usual processes continuing into 2025–26.

University of Bristol – Curriculum Enhancement Project

Bristol's Curriculum Enhancement Project responds to changing student demographics and institutional growth. It embeds a new framework aligned with Barnett's "knowing, acting, being" model, diversifies provision, and addresses workload pressures. Key components include assessment transformation (TESTA), academic year restructuring, curriculum

design workshops, and leadership development. The project spans discovery (2018–19), implementation and evaluation (2019–24), and embedding activities through 2026.

University of Leeds – Curriculum Redefined

Leeds is delivering a multi-year, university-wide redesign of teaching, learning, and assessment to equip students for success in a rapidly changing world – beginning in 2021, with full integration by 2025 and continuous review thereafter. The approach emphasises partnership with students, evidence-based decision-making, and sustainability. Activities include recruitment and capacity building, adoption of a simplified curriculum model, development of new pedagogical frameworks, and embedding a people-centred design ethos. The programme culminates in the launch of "Your Course, Your Future, Our World," supported by revised policies and processes and a transition to business-as-usual.



4. Table Summary of Project Partners and key features of their Curriculum Transformation Programmes

Institution & Programme Title	Aim & Rationale	Key Themes	Delivery Phases
SOAS: Curriculum For Success	• Simplify programme portfolio for efficiency • Improve student experience through collaboration • Create a curriculum model that supports learning • Introduce a new academic calendar for coherence	• Sustainable 'size and shape' model • Opportunities for innovation and growth • Common curriculum framework • Streamlined assessment approach	Size & Shape Review: • 2025-6 Implementation • 2026 onwards - Evaluation Academic Calendar: • 2024/25 - Discovery • Sept 2025 - Implementation • 2026 onwards - Evaluation
University of Salford: Education Delivery Plan	• Enhance student engagement and academic outcomes • Support diverse learner needs and inclusion • Optimise classroom time for future-ready graduates • Embed Active Blended Learning (ABL)	• Build evidence base for ABL • Develop ABL models • Capture institutional best practice • Define principles for implementation	• April 2025: Commence Discovery • July 2025: Establish Workstreams • Sept 2026: Implementation • 2027 onwards: evaluation
University of Exeter: Curriculum For Change	• Optimise student experience and employability • Enhance wellbeing across the community • Simplify undergraduate portfolio • Smooth the burden of teaching and assessment	• UG portfolio review based on 20 shared course and assessment principles • Review of academic calendar • Skills framework and employability pathways • Transition and belonging support	• 2024 Discovery • 2024-25 Launch of 5 workstreams • 2025-26 and 2026-27 Implementation • 2026 onwards: Phased Delivery and Evaluation
Newcastle University: Leading Edge Curriculum	• Embed a universal curriculum framework • Promote inclusivity and career outcomes • Harmonise structures and enable innovation	• Programme structures and delivery models • Learning, teaching, and assessment design • Education for Life skills and attributes • Implementation preparation	• •2023-24: Discovery • •2024-25: Development • •2025-26 onwards: Implementation

Institution & Programme Title	Aim & Rationale	Key Themes	Delivery Phases
University of Reading: Portfolio Review	- Enhance student experience and wellbeing - Create a sustainable, coherent portfolio - Improve staff workload and resource use	- Programme and module review - Academic year restructuring - Redesign against core design principles	2020: Initiation 2021–22: proposal development 2022–23: Implementation 2023–24: pre-launch 2024–25: launch 2025–26: Business as Usual delivery and evaluation
University of Bristol: Curriculum Enhancement Project	- Respond to changing student demographics - Embed Barnett's 'knowing, acting, being' framework - Diversify provision and address workload pressures	- TESTA (assessment transformation) - Structure of the Academic Year (SAY) - Curriculum design workshops - Leadership development	2018–19: Discovery 2019–24: Implementation & evaluation 2024–26: follow-up/embedding into Business as Usual
University of Leeds: Curriculum Redefined	- Deliver a people-centred redesign of teaching and learning - Equip students for success in a changing world - Emphasise partnership, evidence-based decisions, and sustainability	- Student partnership in education - Sector-leading pedagogies and digital integration - Community and belonging - Sustainable, research-based education - Simplified curriculum model and new frameworks	2021–23: Design and Launch: facilitated design workshops using 'design playbook'. 2023–25 Relaunch of programmes according to 'Your Course, Your Future, Our World' principles, using institutional templates and supported by departmental specialists. 2025–26: transition to BAU; launch of 'Your course, Your future, Our World.'

5. Common Emerging Themes in Curriculum Transformation

Strategic, Whole Institution Change	Development of coherent frameworks that apply across programmes and faculties, with local ownership of disciplinary content.	
Simplification, Sustainability, Efficiency	Reviewing portfolios and embedding shared principles to reduce complexity, improve resource use and ensure sustainability.	
Inclusivity and Student Wellbeing	Supporting diverse student needs, improving transition experiences, and fostering community.	
Skills and Employability	Many projects include frameworks for skills development and initiatives to prepare students for future careers.	
Pedagogic Innovation	Active learning, blended delivery, and evidence-based teaching approaches feature prominently.	
Digitalisation	Digital tools for curriculum management enable faster programme updates and better alignment with student needs and market demand.	
Sustainability	Ensuring resource efficiency and embedding principles that help universities adapt faster to future challenges.	
Assessment and Academic Year Reform	Redesigning assessment strategies and restructuring the academic year to smooth workload and improve student experience.	

Fig 5.1 Common themes in curriculum transformation programmes.

Toolkit Link: You can hear Professor Beverley Hawkins discuss current themes in curriculum transformation on the Advance HE *Talking Transformation* Podcast 'Future Facing Curricula' (2026) advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/talking-transformation-future-facing-curricula

6. Enabling Factors in Curriculum Transformation

Across our seven projects, we identified five important enabling factors that supported curriculum change.

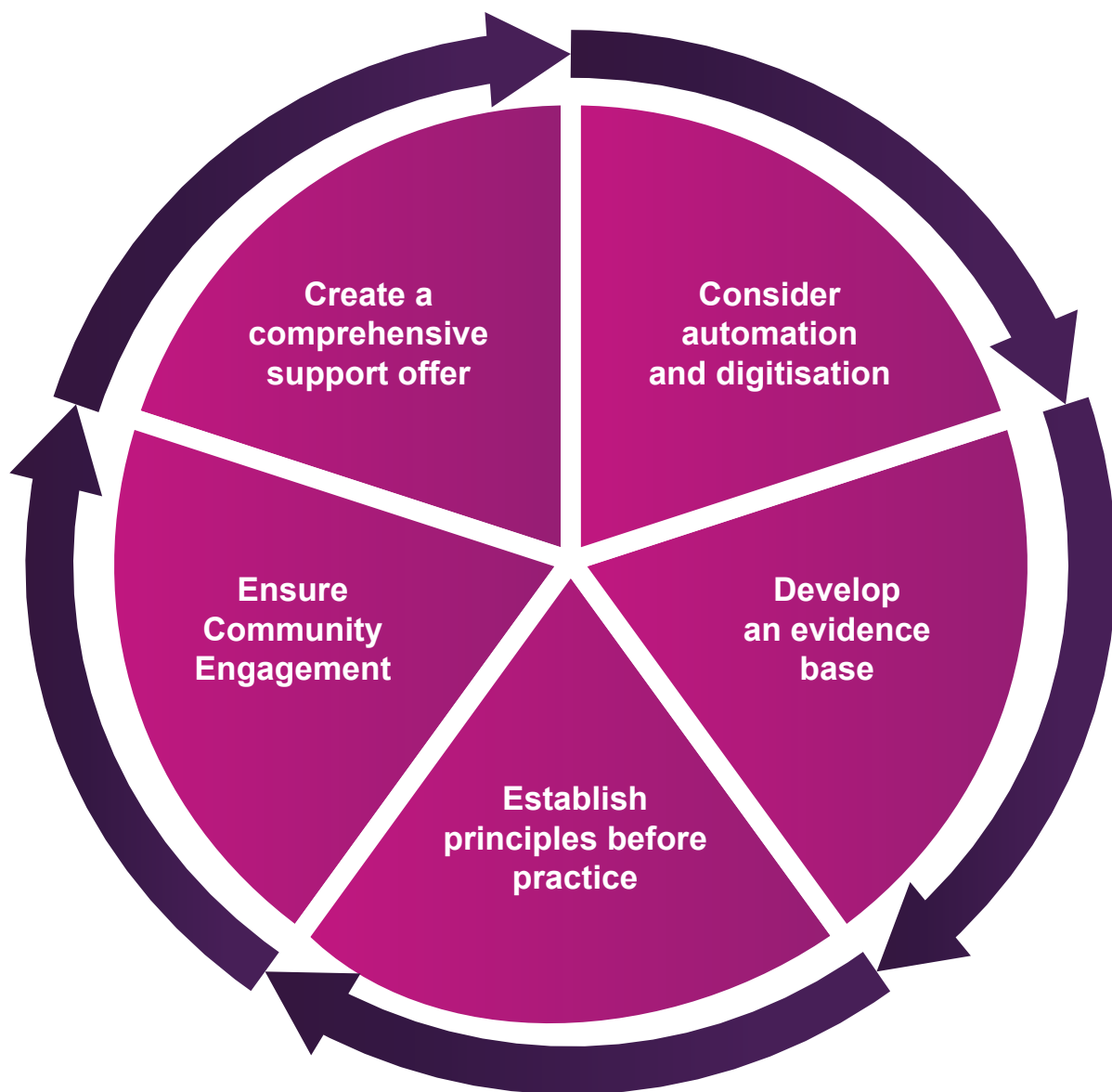


Fig 6.1 Five Enabling Factors in Curriculum Reform



6.1 Consider Digitalisation and Automation

Several institutions in the project team have underpinned their projects with a new, digital curriculum management system (CMS). Working as a 'single source of truth', the systems enable better tracking of programme and module change. They also feature automated, embedded process workflows that speed up programme approval and reduce workload pressure across programme development and academic teams.

These systems can also facilitate programme level assessment mapping, leading to more strategic assessment planning. Similarly, they also enable programme teams to capture intended learning objectives across programmes, and to map programme content against agreed skills frameworks. This supports a more joined-up approach to programme design and approval.

The new systems also enhanced the speed with which teams can update programmes in the future, creating a faster and more agile amendments process that will enable institutions to keep pace with pedagogical innovation and market demand.

Alongside this, some projects recognised that access to more granular student data, including data on attainment gaps across specific assessments and modules, could support interventions such as the

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Academic Leader Insight:

(I wish I'd known)... how valuable a curriculum management system would have been!

Pro-Vice Chancellor Education

”

design of more inclusive assessments, some of which were co-created with students. At the **University of Salford**, an early pilot on inclusive assessment brought together educators and a postgraduate research student to explore awarding gaps on assessments. This generated insights on, for example, the use of 'command' terms in assessment briefs which could be implemented through inclusive assessment projects (Blezard, Power, Whitnall and Taylor, 2023)

Toolkit Link: Salford's work on inclusive assessment is described in a blog written by the Salford project partners, and a student-authored case-study included in the project toolkit.

Exceptions were at the **University of Reading** and the **University of Leeds**, who sought to develop a people centred approach to curriculum design. At Leeds, this involved recruiting new educators in every department to build local capacity in curriculum design and ensure commitment to the new framework.

“

Academic Leader Insight:

...Creativity, inspiration, and tapping into values about curriculum are necessary but not sufficient conditions for success...alongside them you need structural levers and systematic approaches to get beyond the problem of 'working with the willing.

Pro-Vice Chancellor Education

”

6.2 Develop an Evidence Base

Central to all seven projects was the need to ensure the student and academic communities were committed to the change. All project partners reflected that developing ‘buy in’ across academic communities took time. The cultural shift from local control of curriculum frameworks to a more centralised model based on shared principles was a challenge for all partners.

Across all projects, transformation leads found that sharing clear evidence and rationale, often informed by peer reviewed literature, for the proposed changes was vital for ensuring understanding and acceptance of changes. This is unsurprising, given the value placed on empirical evidence within academic cultures. All projects implemented an important ‘discovery phase’, which in most cases lasted over a year. These phases worked best where teams of academics and professional services colleague were brought together to ensure representation across different parts of the institution, and where they had focus on specific aspects of the planned change. Examples included the assessment projects developed by **Universities**

of Salford, SOAS and Bristol, and workstreams at **Reading and SOAS** which explored different models for delivering the academic year.

At the same time, many projects sought to secure multi-stakeholder engagement in the project, to sense-check proposals with the wider community.

Academic Leader Insight:

“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.”

**Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor,
Education**

Case example: Stakeholder consultation at the University of Exeter

At the University of Exeter, consultation included:

- Market research with applicants and their parents – including key international markets
- Four discovery workstreams with academics, students and PS colleagues
- A series of focus groups with students over several months, covering different areas of the projects and covering a representative cohort from all faculties and year groups from Stage 1 to PGR.
- Regular external stakeholder panels with separate groups of employers, heads of post-16 education and schools, and globally recognised higher education thought leaders.

Importantly, these consultation activities took place early on during the programme, which enabled the transformation team to describe how the proposals were co-created with students and academic staff, and had therefore been informed by wider community expectations.

Toolkit Link: A consultation toolkit has been developed by our undergraduate project assistant, Alina Hamova, and is available alongside this report.

Centring the student voice through the evidence base was central to all programmes. Some more challenging conversations about making changes were transformed where students shared personal stories

that contextualised the wider evidence and proposals for transformation. Likewise, student involvement in co-creating resources to support change resulted in much greater enthusiasm for these changes.

Student Leader Insight:

...the biggest challenges I faced in my role were all related to conflicting views. During the consultation phases of the project, those were the areas by far hardest to manage, both internally within University Governance and externally with student engagement. Beginning with the latter, working on a project on the scale of curriculum reform meant consulting with students across the university in all the different faculties, departments, and years of study. Naturally, this produces a significant amount of conflicting feedback between courses, but surprisingly, you also get some varied feedback within courses themselves. Initially, this was challenging, but breaking it down to the fundamentals of what students need and expect from their courses helped guide conversations

to a clearer point. Students often aren't experts in pedagogy and speak from their very personal experience of their degrees (which is highly useful and by no means should be ignored), so guiding them in the conceptual space can be incredibly helpful. And then similarly, academics will also come into spaces with their own experiences and the experiences of the students they spoke to, framing it as the most important feedback in policy spaces. In spaces like that, 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 on conversations.

Students' Union Sabbatical Officer

Academic Leader Insight:

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.

University Dean

Case example: Student Led Change at the University of Exeter

As part of its 'Curriculum for Change' programme, the **University of Exeter** originally intended to develop an institution wide stage 1 module to help immerse students in the university's interdisciplinary 'greener, fairer, healthier' mission and to provide opportunities to connect with their peers. However, in feedback sessions, students emphasised their preferences for more localised, department- or programme level approaches to developing community and belonging and wanted to understand the university's strategic goals within the context of their own discipline. This resulted in a change of plans. The Curriculum for Change programme team

introduced a co-creation approach, tasking a group of students on an extra-curricular 'Grand Challenge' project with developing adaptable resources to support these goals that could be embedded within existing core stage 1 content. The new approach resulted in greater institutional support for the change, with the resources developed by students integrated in several pilots and delivered in taught modules across all three faculties in the following months.

Toolkit Link: A blog authored by the student leaders is available in the project toolkit.

Student Leader Insight:

...the real dedication from university staff to upholding and protecting time for student voices really makes these spaces significantly easier to navigate. Often, student leaders are the only students in the room, so ensuring they are given protected time to speak not only enhances the discussion but also gives newcomers that much-needed boost in confidence (speaking as a first-generation university student, rooms with academics and other senior staff can feel incredibly daunting!).

Students' Union Sabbatical Officer

Tackling less controversial aspects of the change process first helped to build confidence towards progressing the wider transformation programme. Across the partner institutions, activity to support staff and student wellbeing, to deliver more inclusive education as well as to projects embedding employability skills across the full programme portfolio were more widely accepted by the community.

Academic Leader Insight:

Communicate early and through different formats about the benefits and necessity of the change. Academics like 'evidence' - so build that into the narrative and share with staff and students. The student voice can be very helpful in securing 'buy-in' from staff.

University Dean

Student Leader Insight:

...the prior knowledge of working on curriculum transformation [on a pilot project] in my department gave me clear insight into how this would positively impact student experience across the wider institution. It also gave me the skills to effectively articulate the often-nuanced position students are in, whilst understanding the broader principles that departments were expected to uphold.

Students' Union Sabbatical Officer.

A strong story for change, underpinned by clear communication around expectations and timelines, was most effective when delivered consistently across departments, and co-owned by senior colleagues across faculties and central university leadership teams. This involved close collaboration between Faculties and central support, with academic and professional services colleagues working on delivery together and establishing a culture of trust. At the University of Exeter, communications and guidance on delivery phases was reviewed for clarity and tone by an 'academic reference group' comprising academic colleagues from all three faculties, before it was released to departments. At the University of Reading, regular, well attended institutional briefings led by the PVC Education provided regular updates and ensured that conversations about curriculum change were open to all.

Toolkit Link: A flexible PowerPoint template to help showcase 'Your Curriculum Transformation Programme on a Slide' has been developed by students as part of the project toolkit.

Academic Leader Insight:

Stick at it and be clear about your objectives! There will be a lot of resistance, so you need resilience and clarity.

Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor Education

Case example

The **University of Bristol's** project to change their academic year (Structure of the Academic Year' or SAY project) impacted every aspect of institutional operations. Human Resources needed to rethink recruitment timelines, Residences to reorganise rental contracts, Catering to adapt their services to a different rhythm of the year, Library to rethink purchasing, Estates to adapt summer maintenance schedules, and Sports to consider the impact on varsity leagues. However, a change to the academic calendar also represents a significant cultural shift. This was a 'life, the university and everything' project which needed buy-in from the whole institution and acceptance that

some well-established norms around timescales for e.g. admissions and registration would have to change. The transformation team focused on communicating changes locally, developing tailored leaflets explaining 'what the new academic year means to me', and introducing bookmarks with the new academic calendar on which could be distributed across the whole community. This ensured that everybody understood the likely impacts on their work processes as well as the benefits that would result.

Toolkit Link: A blog articulating the delivery of the SAY project is included in the project toolkit.

Overall, an evidence base helps to move the focus of conversations across the institution from 'why' to 'how'. However, programme transformation teams found that the evidence needed support from a clear, consistent and shared narrative, balanced alongside clearly demonstrated responsiveness to staff and student feedback, and to wider contextual challenges. Shared

ownership was fundamental to all seven projects and was the intention behind the title of our Project: Curricular Reform: A Whole Community Approach. The next section explores in more detail how the partner projects worked to create local ownership, alongside centralised support models.

6.3 Establish Principles before Practice

Having developed an evidence base and rationale for change, most project partners began to establish core principles that would inform delivery. These were typically high-level expectations that helped Schools and Departments embed the change consistently at a local level. For example:

- The University of Reading's Portfolio Review programme implemented new curriculum principles impacting module / programme design and assessment.
- The University of Salford's Inclusive Assessment Project was based on four core principles: Clear, Understood, Authentic, Robust and Personalised.

- The University of Exeter's Curriculum for Change was informed by 20 Course and Assessment Design Principles, organised into four themes: Design Values, Skills, Inclusion and Assessment
- Newcastle University's Leading-Edge Curriculum was shaped by principles that set out expectations around credit structures, competency models, and AI-secure assessment.

Reflections from transformation programme teams highlighted the importance of these underpinning principles in enabling changes that were 'centrally supported, but locally owned'. This approach retained flexibility within local programme teams and protected important disciplinary identities and pedagogies, preventing concerns about a 'one size fits all' approach.

“

Academic Leader Insight:

Think about leadership training earlier for Programme Directors and School Education Directors.

Pro Vice Chancellor Education

”

The model also enabled programme management to be operationalised at an institutional level. Progress against the principles could be checked and adjustments to support made as the programme advanced into delivery.

The **Universities of Reading** and **Exeter** stood up teams of academic developers or ‘portfolio officers’ who worked centrally but built close relationships with programme and department education teams. At Exeter, the portfolio officers met regularly with department teams, to undertake a ‘pulse check’ against each of the institutional course and assessment principles. The conversational pulse checks revealed progress over time, as well as common areas where teams felt ‘stuck’ – and as such, were an invaluable tool in identifying principles which required additional support to implement. These fed into future iterations

of the principles, and into the development of support structures to build local capacity. Once again, feeding back to departments that their concerns had been heard and that support structures were in place increased the sense of engagement and buy-in – another vital piece of the puzzle in any curriculum transformation programme.

“

Academic Leader Insight:

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

Pro-Vice Chancellor Education

”

6.4 Ensure Community Engagement

Initial conversations about strategic institutional curriculum change were often met with scepticism by academic departments used to full ownership over the structure and principles underpinning their programmes.

“

Academic Leader Insight:

Get everyone on the bus with you from the start.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education

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Student Leader Insight:

I wish I’d known that departments had different levels of buy-in compared to my own.

Students’ Union Sabbatical Officer

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Not every change has to be a ‘big bang’. Smaller, local changes enable transformation to be built from the ground up. This approach draws on existing good practice in departments and enables the transformation to build on pilot work. When delivered incrementally, pilot activity can reduce risks associated with delivering major change at pace.

Departmental ownership of curriculum innovation also develops local advocates for curriculum transformation, further supporting community engagement. Similarly, many programme teams drew effectively on 'early adopters' of the proposed changes, recognising that peer voices are vital in departmental communities in helping more sceptical colleagues to understand why change is needed and how it can be delivered effectively.

Professional Services Leader Insight:

the discovery phase proved far more important than anticipated. It was not simply a preparatory step, but a critical part of the transformation process. Where discovery created space to surface assumptions, clarify expectations, and align stakeholders early, design activity was significantly more focused and productive.

Curriculum Transformation Manager

Case Example: Iterative Change at SOAS

Several smaller projects informed the Curriculum for Success programme at SOAS. Two examples include a project developing a toolkit, cocreated with students, on curriculum decolonisation, and TESTA (Transforming the Experiences of Students Through Assessment) project which delivered incremental change over several years. These projects highlighted

the power of collaboration, promoted dialogue about learning and teaching 'in real time', and enabled communities to look differently at their curriculum, and was accepted widely by colleagues and students.

Toolkit Link: A blog about SOAS's 'small is beautiful' approach to change is available in the project toolkit.

Where strategic change is owned centrally, there is a risk that academic departments and professional services teams feel 'left out' of the conversation. Holding conversations across the institution and ensuring wide representation on workstreams ensures that important obstacles can be identified and hopefully, resolved early in the change process. All seven project partners recognised local ownership of curriculum design was vital. However, they all also created important mechanisms to reduce workload pressure on local academic leads. Several project partners emphasised how 'third space' teams such as learning design and education development could play a key role here, not just in ensuring delivery of the changes, but in bolstering community buy-in and wellbeing. This helped reduce the risk of motivation fade associated with delivering long-term change over several months or even longer in the case of three-year programmes.

Academic Leader Insight:
(When doing this project again, I would prioritise...) Empowering middle leadership- and ensuring leadership responsibilities in schools and departments was distributed.

Pro-Vice Chancellor Education

Student Leader Insight:

...my best advice is to fully embrace partnership with many projects you are working alongside passionate individuals who often want the very same outcomes. Collaborate and discuss, it's never too late to raise points, and in your role as student leaders, it's integral that you do!

Students' Union Sabbatical Officer

Case Example: Academic Development Support at the University of Reading.

At the **University of Reading**, educator development teams played a vital role in working with departments to align shared teaching and learning principles with disciplinary pedagogies in support of curriculum redesign. Nina Brooke, Education Developer at the University of Reading, argues that “education developers are uniquely placed to build relationships based on credibility and trust, ask (naïve but often

really good!) questions, and support collaborative and values-led curriculum change... we also employed and supported a team of student partners to work collaboratively with colleagues in their schools”.

Toolkit Link: A blog about the central role of Academic Developers in Curriculum Transformation at the University of Reading has been included in the Project Toolkit.

6.5 Create comprehensive opportunities for dialogue and support

‘Buy-in’ emerges across a spectrum. Across all our projects, we encountered colleagues who were fully in support of the changes (and who often wanted to increase the pace of change), and those who were vocally resistant. Most colleagues, however, found themselves somewhere in between the two extremes. Their attention was shaped by their own experience as educators, as well as their capacity and motivation to engage.

Professional Services Leader Insight:

Early in the pilot, it became clear that successful curriculum redesign depends as much on shared understanding, local ownership, and organisational readiness as it does on the design methodology itself.

Curriculum Transformation Manager

As discovery phases developed, the programme teams had to stand up a variety of support and consultation opportunities, to give academic colleagues and students opportunities to discuss the rationale for change (the ‘why’) and also to help those who were already starting to explore the implications of the proposed changes for their own modules and teaching practice (‘the why’). These consultation opportunities enabled project teams to respond to challenges and setbacks experienced in departments.

Academic Leader Insight:

Regular coordination meetings for workstream leads helped to deconflict, avoid duplication of work, and pick up problems quickly, ensuring that everyone was on the same page.

University Dean

Case Example: Centralised support at the University of Exeter.

The University of Exeter developed multiple mechanisms for academic and professional services colleagues to engage with Curriculum for Change which ranged from opportunities for conversation and ongoing dialogue for those who wanted to discuss the programme, to information on implementation and delivery for those who wanted guidance on what to do next. These included

- Workstreams co-chaired by academic and professional services leads.
- Regular open online 'drop in' meetings, often without an agenda, where colleagues could sign up and provide feedback.
- Tailored design workshops for departments and programme teams delivered by learning design and education development colleagues.
- 1:1 support meetings.

- Separate checklists of actions for module leads, programme leads, and departmental education directors, released at the beginning of each new phase of delivery.
- A comprehensive 'resources hub' aligned to every project workstream, containing clear guidance and information that evolved in line with delivery phases.
- A programme team email inbox to collate questions from across the academic community and identify common emerging themes that could be addressed through further support workshops and guidance.

In addition, members of the team regularly attended departmental, faculty and professional services team meetings, to ensure that all colleagues had a chance to ask questions, voice concerns or ideas, and understood the timelines and expectations for delivery.

Portfolio Officer Insight:

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The support offer changed significantly over time. The material in the resources hub was originally introduced all at once. However, colleagues found the volume of material overwhelming, so the information was edited and released in phases, to time with the phased delivery of the programme. This meant that colleagues were directed to the information that was relevant for the current phase of delivery. Later in the programme delivery phase, the rationale for change had become accepted more widely. We changed the status of the regular 'drop-in meetings' since justifying the project and its workstreams was no longer necessary. We renamed them 'Curriculum for Change next steps conversations', encouraging colleagues could ask practical implementation questions relating to their personal role in supporting the change.

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7. Summary of Project Outcomes

Our project has supported a wide range of stakeholders across Higher Education Institutions and the broader HE sector.

Resources for University Education Leaders and Educators

- A community of practice for those leading curricular reform.
- One online and two in-person events.
- Further presentations on curriculum reform at national conferences and sector groups including the Advance HE Teaching Excellence Symposium, Russell Group DVC Education Network, the QAA Executive Leaders (Education) Networking Community, and the HEC Transformation Expo.
- An Advance HE podcast on curricular reform.
- A blog site which shared insights from each of our different transformation programmes. Blog posts shared practical guidance on curriculum innovation and resources and experiences to help colleagues with common challenges including skills mapping, piloting, scaling, and stakeholder engagement.

Student Community and Leaders

- A student panel on co-creation, delivered in partnership with students and presented with student leaders on curriculum transformation with students at national events.
- Case studies and resources, developed by students, which highlight the importance of student leadership and voice in curriculum (re)design.
- A shared focus on inclusion, belonging, wellbeing, and employability.

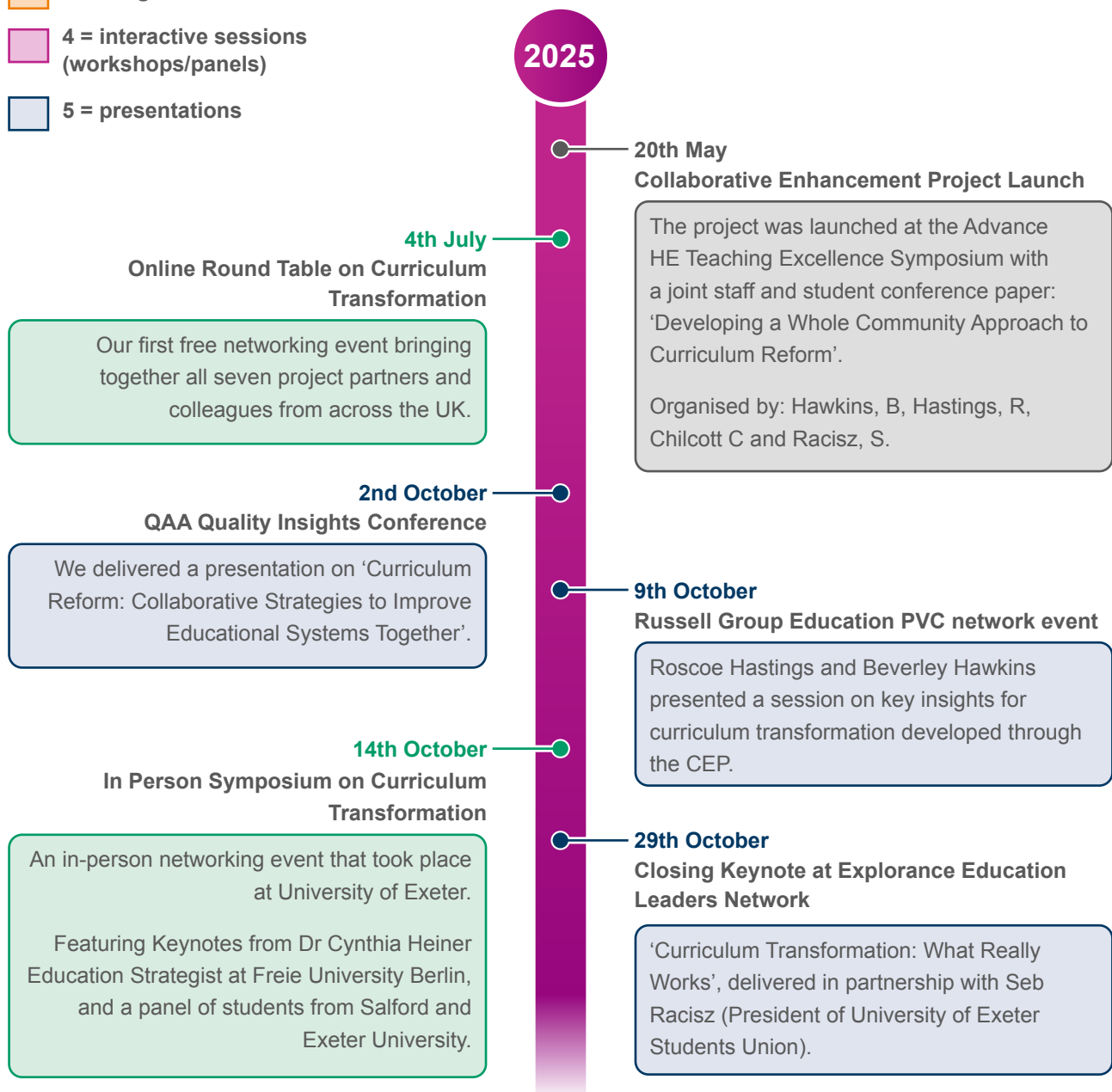
UK HE Sector

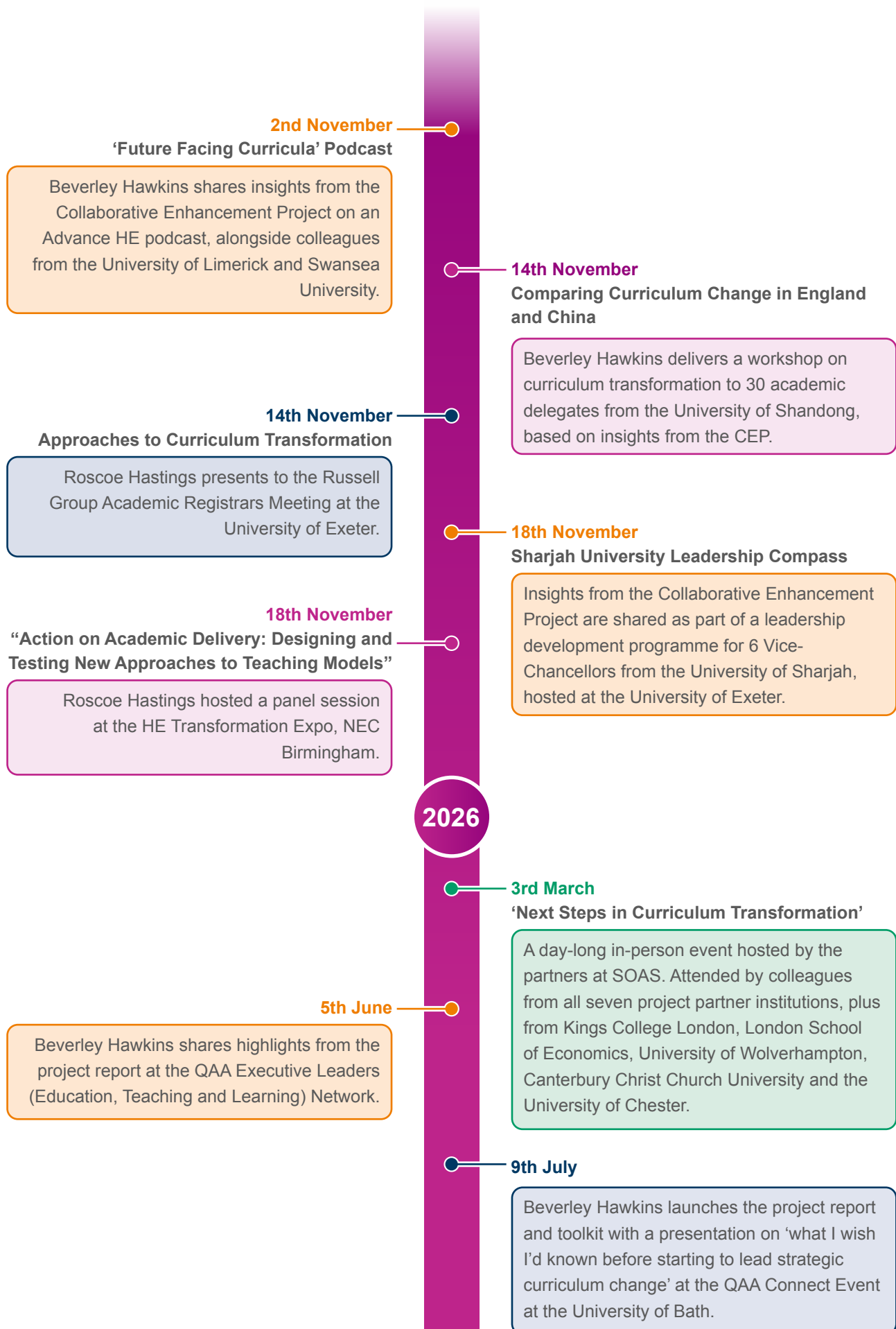
- Engagement tools that support long-term sector sustainability.
- Best practice insights from institutions already engaged in reform.
- Guidance to help providers develop market-attractive curricula aligned with TEF, graduate outcomes, and financial resilience.

8. Collaborative Enhancement Project Engagement timeline

Key:

- 1 = launch
- 2 = partner networking events
- 3 = insight events
- 4 = interactive sessions (workshops/panels)
- 5 = presentations





9. Conclusion

Across the seven partner institutions, a consistent message has emerged: successful curriculum transformation depends not only on structural or procedural change, but on building shared purpose, trust, and engagement across the whole academic community.

“ Professional Services Leader Insight:

Treat curriculum transformation as an institutional change process, not a curriculum redesign exercise. The most important lesson from the pilot has been that successful curriculum transformation depends less on redesigning curriculum documents and more on creating the conditions for meaningful academic change. Strong design matters, but it is only one part of the work. The real challenge is aligning people, policy, process, systems, and decision-making around

a shared educational purpose, while creating enough structure to maintain coherence and enough flexibility for disciplines to make the change meaningful in context. Curriculum transformation is not only about changing what is taught. It is about changing how institutions think, decide, design, and work together - which is not an easy task!

Curriculum Transformation Manager

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The project has highlighted that many institutions face similar challenges, whether relating to financial sustainability, regulatory expectations, student diversity, and technological disruption. At the same time, each institution brings distinct contexts, cultures, and innovations to the process of reform. Bringing these perspectives together through a community of practice has created space for both reflection and acceleration: our partners and community members have been able to test ideas, share solutions, and learn from one another's experience across different phases of transformation.

A key insight from this work is the growing importance of practice sharing across the sector. Traditionally positioned as competitors, universities are increasingly recognising the value of collaboration in addressing shared systemic challenges. This project provides clear evidence that sector-level dialogue through communities of practice, joint events, and co-created resources, enhances both the quality and pace of institutional change.

This points to an emerging model of 'coopetition' in Higher Education (Thompson 2025), in which institutions collaborate strategically in areas of common challenge while retaining their distinctive identities and market positioning. Within this project, coopetition has been reflected in the open exchange of insights on sensitive issues such as portfolio rationalisation, assessment reform, and academic year redesign. Far from diminishing institutional distinctiveness, this exchange has strengthened collective capacity, improved decision-making, and contributed to a more resilient and sustainable sector.

Building on the work of this Collaborative Enhancement Project, three priorities emerge for both participating institutions and the wider Higher Education sector. They form our concluding reflections to the project. Each priority has, for us, generated a question in the form of a 'sector provocation', that could prompt further insights into future steps that UK Higher Education can take in response to the current pressures shaping curriculum reform.

9.2 Embedding Co Creation with Students and Staff

Sector Provocation: In a time of constrained resource, what does student partnership and co-creation look like?

A highlight of our project has been the opportunity to collaborate with students to create resources that further develop and disseminate insights generated through the project. We have learned that a co-created model helps to build a better evidence case and rationale for change. Our findings point to the need to

embed student partnership more systematically across discovery, design, and evaluation phases of curriculum reform. We encourage colleagues to find capacity for co-creation, including training and recognition for both students and staff. This has been especially valuable in supporting a transition towards more inclusive accessible curricula, and in aligning skills and employability to students' changing needs.

9.3 Enabling Scalable and Sustainable Change

Sector Provocation: What support do institutions need to move transformations out of 'project mode' and into 'Business as Usual'?

Academic Leader Insight:

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.

Pro Vice-Chancellor Education

Ultimately, curriculum reform is not a discrete project but an ongoing process of institutional learning and adaptation. However they begin, most transformations ultimately have the goal of becoming 'business as usual'. This suggests why many institutions have invested in digital infrastructure and systems that support efficient, transparent curriculum management and ongoing programme development. In the context of growing sector pressures, the insights we developed also point to the centrality of workload, wellbeing and capacity considerations to implementation strategies. Finally, sustainable change is linked to continuous monitoring and evaluation – and the importance of identifying 'what does good look like?' right at the start.

Academic Leader Insight:

Ideally, we wouldn't do curriculum transformation as a one-off project but have a rolling "programme of sufficient investment in curriculum design and development.

**Associate Pro Vice Chancellor
Education**

Professional Services Insight:

While significant institutional change programmes may be needed now at a time of significant change, the lessons learned through transformation "programmes" should inform an ongoing and cyclical approach to ensure that institutional portfolios remain market-aligned and agile for the future and are more responsive to regulatory, financial and political changing winds. Ensuring that colleagues now see curricular review as a part of business as usual is vital for future sustainability and efficiency considerations.

**Director of Teaching Excellence & Student
Experience**

9.3 Sustaining and Expanding Communities of Practice

Sector Provocation: What does ‘coopetition’ look like in a curriculum transformation context? How can we work together to share insights and support each other to deliver an enhanced student experience across the sector?

The findings of this project suggest that a whole-community approach grounded in evidence, co-creation, and collaboration within and across institutions offers a powerful model for navigating future change.

100% of participants at our events confirmed they would be interested in taking part in more sector-wide engagement and collaboration on curriculum reform.

The interest and continued engagement with events and materials developed by the project indicates continued interest in sustaining a cross-institutional community of practice. We hope further opportunities

100% of participants at our events confirmed they would be interested in taking part in more sector-wide engagement and collaboration on curriculum reform.

will emerge for structured practice sharing (e.g. thematic workshops, case exchanges, and peer-learning groups). We are exploring how to formalise the community as an ongoing sector resource, potentially linked to QAA enhancement activity. A ‘coopetition model’ of practice-sharing enables institutions to share not only successes but also the challenges and unintended consequences of curriculum transformation. Participants perceived this as an important benefit of our in-person and online engagement activities. Sector-level ‘coopetition’ also facilitates joined-up working across emerging sector initiatives (e.g. around modular provision and lifelong learning) to maximise collective impact and align sector and institutional provision with evolving policy, skills agendas, and labour market needs (Storer-Church and Vulliamy, 2025, Thompson, 2025).

What Participants said about our Collaborative Enhancement Project events:

“A wonderful safe space to share the wins, challenges and lessons learned in curriculum reform.”

“A very useful opportunity for exchange, to gather good ideas and for reassurance.”

“The student panel was most insightful, really liked the student engagement piece from Exeter and looking to set something up similar.”

“It has rather galvanised me to make sure that there are clear outcomes after each stage of a project.”

“some real practical tips to implement- especially around skills”

“...[significant for] my whole role as curriculum developer”

Participants especially valued the opportunity to...

“...reflect on the importance of long-term evaluation”

“...ask questions about financial quantification [of curriculum change]”

“...hear how what we are doing is actually relatively normal in sector terms - we all want to improve our student experience and grapple with how to do this well for staff experience/wellbeing too”

The Higher Education sector’s greatest strength lies in its willingness to learn together to create the new – new knowledge, new techniques, new delivery models. By embracing collaboration alongside competition, our QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project has

given the participants confidence institutions can not only navigate the challenges of curriculum reform but also collectively shape a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable future.

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