

A co-constructed curriculum: a model for implementing total institutional change in partnership with students

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Abstract

This case study outlines a three-stage methodology for implementing wide-ranging, innovative curriculum reform, starting from a co-constructed vision of what a university education should afford its students. In 2014, the University of Portsmouth began the ambitious task of co-creating an institutional vision for a twenty-first century university. Then it undertook to revise its curriculum, working in partnership with its students, to ensure they are set for success in their future careers and acquire the 'Hallmarks of the Portsmouth Graduate' during their higher education (HE) experience. The cohesive re-design of courses enabled students and staff both to co-create an overarching, ambitious vision for the Hallmarks and incorporate it into course design and also to realise the shared vision for the purpose of HE. The case study highlights how developing a sense of shared purpose was key to creating institutional buy-in to the large-scale change initiative; it also presents lessons learnt.

Background and context

In 2014, we at the University of Portsmouth set ourselves the ambitious task of co-creating an institutional vision for a twenty-first century university through a University-wide conversation with the many individuals who study and work within our walls. We then took this vision to heart: we co-created, with the whole University community (staff and students), the University Strategy and the Education Strategy. As part of the consultation, a set of 'Hallmarks of the Portsmouth Graduate' (a set of graduate attributes: www.port.ac.uk/about-us/our-people/hallmarks-of-a-portsmouth-graduate) was created, along with a set of staff 'Hallmarks' (presented within our People Strategy), which capture students' expectations of their educators and the education they experience. The end result was a completely revised taught curriculum for our courses, which acts – and this is the distinctive feature of the co-construction activity – on the Hallmarks and ensures they are part of the teaching and learning experience of all our students. The challenge was to empower our course teams to work with the Hallmarks in a way that was meaningful and relevant to their discipline while also staying true to the original intentions set out in the co-created Hallmarks.

This case study will outline the partnership endeavour, now in its fourth year, and some of the practicalities of co-construction on a large scale.

An overarching aim of constructing our Hallmarks was to unify our staff and student communities in a set of shared beliefs about the identity of the University and what it means to be part of the institution as a student, educator, graduate, researcher and a higher education (HE) professional. The importance of community is represented in our Education Strategy, which commits us to '*providing a vibrant, supportive, collegial learning community of staff and students*'. This was key to creating a set of statements (the Hallmarks) which were meaningful to our very diverse student body.

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There are currently 24,000 students at the University (4,000 international and EU students, from 150 countries in all). As a post-1992 institution, and the only university in an educationally disadvantaged city, Portsmouth has a strong tradition of widening participation and of workplace-based learning. For ten years, the University has met or exceeded location-adjusted benchmarks for recruitment and retention of young and mature students from low participation neighbourhoods. 24% of our students come from BAME groups and 36% of our students come from low-income families.

Model

As an institution, we are proud of our partnership work with students. The National Union of Students (NUS) provides the following definition of partnerships as “...*investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself*” (NUS, 2012, p.8). The process of consultation and co-construction with students of our Education Strategy and Hallmarks, which fed into the design of our taught courses by means of a revised curriculum framework, epitomises this type of partnership.

Our co-construction story begins with student consultation in order to create our Education Strategy 2015-2020. It happened over three stages (see Figure 1): we moved from i) co-creating our overarching strategy to ii) the development of a set of student Hallmarks, which then iii) framed the re-design of our taught provision.

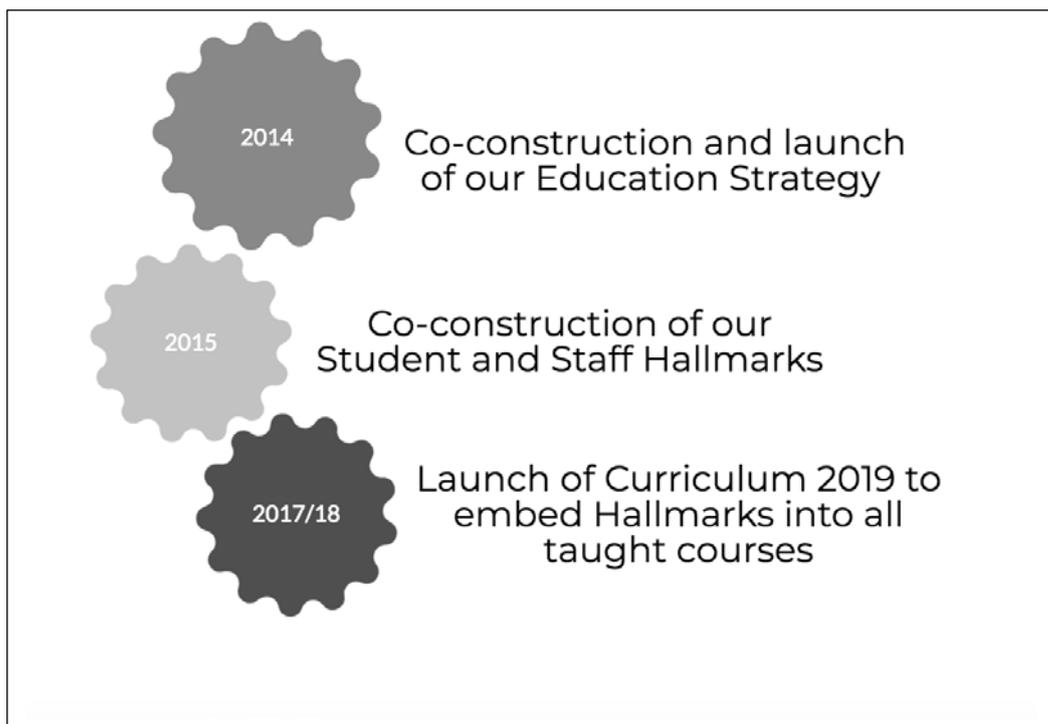


Figure 1. Timeline of co-construction activities

A genuine process of co-construction?

At Portsmouth, we champion the role of students as an ‘active collaborators’ approach, as exemplified here:

“There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that ‘listens’ to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of ‘listening to the student voice’ – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as ‘consumer’, whereas ‘students as change agents’ explicitly supports a view of the student as ‘active collaborator’ and ‘co-producer’, with the potential for transformation.” (Dunne, in Foreword to Dunne and Zandstra, 2011, p.4)

Fundamental to the success of the way we developed a shared vision across our diverse student body was to start the conversation when both the Education and University Strategy were in an embryonic stage (in 2014). It was possible to achieve large-scale consultation, as the Students’ Union (UPSU) has a strong and robust network with which to collect feedback across multiple groups and communities, from sports societies and course representation to online mechanisms. This structure enabled a democratic consultation (there were 7,800+ active members of UPSU in 2014/15, representing about 33% of the student body, which had risen to 10,000+ active members representing about 43% in 2016/17), which provided an opportunity to sense-check collaborative thinking in strategic working groups which combined staff and student members. The working groups considered suggestions received from around 2000 staff and students via an online forum as part of the University-wide conversation to develop the overarching vision for the University’s strategies.

Student feedback to UPSU regarding their studies was all relevant to this project – it was given in faculty zones, via the students’ democratic platform ‘Have Your Say’ and from surveys of course representatives – and, over the 2014-2017 period, it was predominantly about the way students were assessed and how best it should be interpreted. This sent a strong message about the needs of students and informed the new vision for the curriculum.

The partnership between the University and UPSU allowed the co-constructed curriculum project to excel at an activity of complete transformation and *‘be the best it can be for the students’*. These are the words of the Vice President (Education and Democracy), who was the most closely involved in the project over the course of 2017/18, as the new curriculum was designed and implemented.

We now outline the process and partnership approach taken over the three-year period 2015-2018, focusing on the role of assessment as an example of a co-constructed approach.

From the Student Union’s ‘Quality Report’ to our new curriculum structure

The following feedback, contained in the Students’ Union Quality Report (2016), on the volume and timing of assessment, gave direction to what our curriculum framework should provide:

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“84% of students are satisfied with the volume, timing, and nature of their assessments. They told us that they have lots of preparation time, that deadlines can be negotiated, and that lecturers can adapt assessments to suit their needs. However, even more students highlighted that there are recurring issues in deadline bunching, both in terms of multiple deadlines being set at the same time, often the same day, and little time to complete assignments after finishing a topic or receiving feedback, both of which have resulted in difficulties in managing workloads.”

The following excerpts of student feedback on the academic year structure and curriculum framework led to consideration of a number of changes relating to assessment and feedback. These were considered in a wide consultation exercise (via open consultation events, student surveys and consultation in faculties) on the proposed new structure and framework to respond further to staff and student feedback about the best structures and mechanisms to support student learning and the development of the Hallmarks:

“Some units I feel have a perfect workload i.e. ones which include two 2000 essays/reports which are due in at the end of first term and end of second term. However, there are other units which have two hours-worth of lectures per week, plus two hour practicals, which have assignments due every 3/4 weeks.”

“Not enough tests and oral presentations.”

“All the exams are close to each other at the end of the year.”

“I like when the units have a clear assessment guidance.”

“I think to have summative examinations at the end of the academic year in May-June work[s] well. Could possibly introduce a more formative exam period in January.”

Following the extended consultation exercise, a differentiated academic year structure and a new ‘Curriculum Framework Specification’ for Curriculum 2019 (<http://policies.docstore.port.ac.uk/policy-217.pdf>) were adopted, comprising:

- year-long modules – mainly at Level 4, but some at Level 3 – structured to support students’ transition to HE;
- predominantly half-year modules at Levels 5 and 6, designed to facilitate January starts and part-year placements and exchanges;
- modules that: embed Hallmarks and career-enhancing activity in the curriculum; take into account assessment load and the new Assessment for Learning policy.

Curriculum design process

The new Framework contains five key ‘Principles for Curriculum Design’ and a set of underpinning ‘Commitments’ which align with the Education Strategy and describe how our courses provide the knowledge, skills and attributes for success, as defined in the Hallmarks. For example, these commitments are provided as an example of how curricula are designed to embed a Hallmark (*Be able to synthesise new and existing knowledge to generate ideas and develop creative solutions of benefit to the economy and society*) and take into account assessment load and design:

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“1.4. Learning, teaching and assessment will support students to synthesise new and existing knowledge in order to generate ideas and develop creative solutions of benefit to the economy and society.

2.3. Student assessment reflects the ‘real-world’ tasks, requirements and expectations of the professional workplace. It affords students the opportunity to direct their learning toward their professional goals and ambitions.

3.2. Curricula are designed to achieve Assessment Of and For Learning, and provide both formative and summative assessment.”

Importantly, given our authentic co-creation partnership, the fifth principle formalises the continuous dialogue with students:

“Principle 5 - Courses that engage students as active partners in learning, and enable continuous enhancement of curricula, incorporating feedback, evaluation and review into the design and development of the course.”

After three years, we reached a point when all course teams were required to map and re-design their courses in line with the new structures and Hallmarks, working towards a validation event.

Firstly, course teams were required to consider how their curriculum would enable students to engage with and value the Hallmarks. Secondly – an important part of scaffolding transition between levels – was to consider how modules would enable a progressive development of the Hallmarks. Thirdly, it was important that this process was homogeneous and reflected the diverse needs of students. The changes thus needed to be articulated in the context of the student cohort (i.e. part- and full-time; campus-based and distance learning; home, EU and international, etc.). Lastly, and most importantly, the course assessment design needed to facilitate the demonstration of the Hallmarks, for example via learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Many course teams took the opportunity to undertake TESTA - Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (www.testa.ac.uk) in order to consider the effects of programme-level assessment on student learning as part of the re-design of their courses.

Since course teams had already engaged in an audit of how their existing curricula supported students to obtain the Hallmarks, the co-creation exercise enabled a focus, involving students, on how to enhance engagement with the Hallmarks and to reflect on what the Hallmarks meant in the specific subject area, using a reflective tool (see below) and other means such as sticky-dot exercises.

This complex and time-consuming process was facilitated by the creation of a reflective tool for course teams.

A reflective tool for course teams

We created a mapping and checklist document for course teams to use during the re-design of their courses. This reflective tool became the basis of the validation commentary submitted by course teams to gain approval for their courses. This enabled course teams to

consider how the Hallmarks had been embedded across a curriculum. Teams, alongside current students, were encouraged to frame away-day and planning activities around these reflective prompts.

Figure 2 is an example of a Hallmark and the subsequent prompts which needed to be reflected upon in the document:

<p>Hallmark: Be able to synthesise new and existing knowledge to generate ideas and develop creative solutions of benefit to the economy and society</p> <p><i>Prompts:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the course enable students to develop creative solutions to likely problems/scenarios?• How does the course provide an environment that encourages students to generate new ideas and solutions to employment related issues/challenges/problems?• How do students demonstrate their ability to develop creative solutions to benefit society?• How are inclusive learning outcomes, practices, skills and/or attributes appropriate for diverse societies, cultures and individuals being developed?	
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Figure 2. Example of Reflective Tool for a Hallmark

Although outside the scope of this case study, the assessment of graduate attributes – and how feasible this is to do accurately and reliably – has been at the forefront of research in this area (Imperial and ElAtia, 2014). The measurability of these value statements, which underpinned the Hallmarks, generated much debate during curriculum-planning events with course teams. For example:

How can we measure behaving ethically?

How can a contribution to society be quantified?

What does curiosity and seizing opportunities look like in a course specification?

Learning outcomes mapped to the Hallmarks formed part of the validation exercise of the new provision – key to ensuring the successful assessment and understanding of Hallmarks across levels of study.

We provided course teams with a consolidated mapping document, and also a worked example, to complete for learning outcomes, Hallmarks, subject benchmark statements and assessment, which meant that they considered and provided, as part of their validation documentation, an overview of Hallmarks and assessment for the course as a whole.

Lessons learnt

Agreeing shared language for graduate attributes, through co-construction, does not guarantee that all staff and students will have shared interpretations, and that's ok.

We found that the exercise in agreeing the shared language was important. Becoming aware that staff have different interpretations, and that academic, professional services staff and the Students' Union have different interpretations, but can all talk about the Hallmarks,

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made having differing interpretations more acceptable to students. We could then focus on what was key, which was that students could make sense for themselves – and internalise – what the Hallmarks meant for them in practice. They could then present for themselves the skills and attributes they had, whether in a CV or covering letter, in a job interview or an application for further study, or in their professional profiles.

Different disciplinary interpretations are an important consideration when embedding an overarching strategy such as the Hallmarks.

The course-mapping tool allows for a disciplinary focus on what one might conceive as rather generic attributes. Teamwork in science, which might be illustrated as working as part of a lab team, is necessarily different from teamwork in humanities, which might be illustrated by writing a joint piece on a big issue. To take this a step further with science, teamwork in physics is then necessarily different from teamwork in nursing.

Ongoing communication channels between students, staff and management are equally as important to success as the initial co-construction activity.

We used a number of communication channels during the exercise, from all-staff and all-student emails and news stories, to pop-up sessions in faculties and the Students' Union. We also employed committee-reporting structures and regular catch-ups with those involved in leading different aspects of the implementation process.

We developed a regularly updated FAQs document on the University's website, which proved to be a useful and accessible reference point. It acted as a single source of truth and a myth-buster. It was updated by the steering group and its workstreams, following both the pop-up sessions in faculties and consideration of documentation by University committees, thereby capturing all sources of issue and concern.

One very important point – re communication – was that we made clear our awareness of how much work was involved in this exercise. Additionally, we acknowledged the real value of the time and effort put into revising courses and modules to deliver an excellent education for our students and set them for success in their future careers.

In conclusion, the co-construction exercise, which took a new approach to our taught provision, enabled a shared sense of ownership to be created between staff and students. It enabled a large, diverse community to come together and tackle some philosophical questions about what HE, in this era, should mean to us as an institution. The challenge has been taking these overarching values and principles into the formal curriculum. As a result, we hope to see an increased sense of belonging between disciplines and an educational environment which holds true to the strong educational beliefs which began this process.

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