

## OPINION

### A question of curricula?

Educators, training providers, and even regulators, are often sold on the idea that getting 'the' curriculum 'right' is the magic bullet that will solve problems that have been identified with teaching, learning and assessment. We, as assessment practitioners, are often left to take the responsibility if education and training do not deliver. So, it seems important to ask if there is such a magic bullet to get students and educators engaged and where assessment can provide a useful tool to help individuals understand progress in a meaningful way?

Firstly, why is it important to ask this question now? We have been producing qualification specifications, syllabi, and curricula for a very long time. There are two answers that seem to be relevant: amending and changing curricula never seems to get to a point where most students are engaged most of the time and feel that their learning is valuable and relevant; while the impact of new technologies and the dynamic nature of employment and life after formal education makes a monolithic curriculum designed to transfer knowledge and technical information increasingly out of touch with reality.

Secondly, does the idea of a new curricula as a magic bullet solution suggest the source of the problems outlined above? Curricula are, from a regulatory perspective, fixed target-led models that have predictable and quantifiable outcomes. But what if this is the problem? It seems likely that a purely technocratic solution (changing a curriculum or the metrics or the expected outcomes) is only tinkering with the conceptual challenges. Equally, defining things in terms of constraints (competency, qualification, mastery etc.) doesn't suggest anything other than established hurdles and barriers.

Preceding generations will recognise different types of learning solutions allegedly fitted for their times. Mr M'Choakmchild, the teacher in Dicken's *Hard Times for these times* (1854), is a creature of utilitarian thinking that is ultimately the harbinger of Thomas Gradgrind's downfall. Utilitarian education in the nineteenth century functioned to produce 'hands' for factories and servants for the wealthy. It has often been pointed out how much we are indebted to the nineteenth-century factory system in which modern education continues to be framed by its fundamentals.

Higher education was established for centuries on scholarship that invoked reading for a degree as the primary method to promote the transformative power of intellectual rigour and higher learning. It is no coincidence that the earliest universities were shaped by monastic orders focussed on daily rituals of prayers, reading and copying text.

The model of apprenticeships evolved from local guilds of craftsmen. The route to professional standing was an extensive experiential learning journey acquiring practical skills (the apprenticeship), the journeyman who honed their skills by travelling around the country offering their services to different masters and directly to clients, finally setting up as a master in a town gaining acceptance within a local guild.

Reflecting on the second question, it is possible that the idea of a curriculum as a magic bullet is the major hurdle to reshaping learning into a meaningful tool that helps prepare individuals for the dynamic world that they are about to enter, re-enter or engage with. While a curriculum may be a useful mechanism to support regulators' ambitions and objectives, is this the only way to create an engaging, positive, and valuable learning experience that enables teaching and assessment staff to manage and grow the cognitive capabilities (the intellectual and practical capital) of individual learners?

Disruptions to the current modes of education, training and continuing professional development are now happening with increasing frequency: AI has generated capabilities to develop and publish training packages from raw content produced by subject matter experts rather than training

organisations; digital/virtual learning via learning systems and hubs offers learning-on-demand; regulated apprenticeships using IfATE's published Standards increasingly utilise online and digital delivery systems going arm-in-arm with the practicalities of employment. Given the accelerating pace of disruption and the dynamics affecting the wider social experience outside of the realm of formal learning how do we get beyond the magic bullet?

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