

Staff embodied
experiences of
curriculum reform
policies

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Project Snapshot
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Project Overview

As a professional services staff member in student education at the University of Leeds, I set out to investigate how staff live through the challenges and opportunities of large-scale educational reform. Focusing on the university's ambitious **Curriculum Redefined (CR)** initiative, I wanted to understand how curriculum re-organisation and change affects the people delivering such change. My motivation was to better understand what these transformations bring and see what can foster a positive working environment within the institution. I was guided by the principle that "if we want to create an inclusive, supportive environment for students, we must first do this for ourselves".

I sought to develop my past experiences in qualitative research using visual outputs to gather data and share findings, such as an infocomic (shown later), to capture the richness of staff experiences. I wanted staff to see themselves reflected authentically in outputs, while enhancing engagement within the university and sparking broader conversations across the higher education sector. The project is especially timely, as we reach the halfway point of CR, providing a vital snapshot of how staff are experiencing this process. These insights are essential for exploring staff well-being and engagement, ensuring the benefits of reforms ripple out to everyone, not only students.

Project Objectives

- Explore and raise awareness and understanding of the projected benefits of CR while exploring perceived gaps hindering staff engagement.
- Highlight and promote under-recognised successes by staff in delivering the benefits of CR.
- Identify and address staff imbalances to support equitable delivery and foster a culture of shared experiences, discussion, and support within the university community.

Methods

Participants took part in the research through a Minerva Organisation using the Learning Journal tool. Responses to questions were only available to the participant and me, as the Principal Investigator (PI). After completing an online consent form with their university IT username, I added participants to the Minerva Organisation. Initially, they responded to five questions, beginning with creating a representation of their experiences with CR (e.g., using LEGO or other materials) and recording a 3-minute explanatory video. I posed follow-up questions to clarify responses and subsequent answers were given in multimedia or written



formats. Data was anonymised, securely stored in OneDrive, and thematically analysed. Once the study was complete, all raw data in the Minerva Organisation was deleted to ensure confidentiality.

Key findings

Remembering this research is a snapshot in time:

- Staff believe in CR's potential but feel hindered by bureaucracy, lack of resources, and how large its agenda is, so much so that it is not understandable, with many professional services staff seeing it as “not aimed at me”.
- CR is seen as a top-down initiative, creating disconnection from those making it happen on the ground. Metaphors such as a "black cloud" or "Duckapotamus" reflect confusion and fears of unnecessary ineffective reinvention rather than meaningful progress in improving student educational experiences.
- Staff feel alienated and sceptical about CR's effectiveness, particularly around inclusion, decolonisation, and diversity.
- Despite challenges, staff remain committed to CR's vision, and things are getting better in terms of practical implementation.

Implications for practice

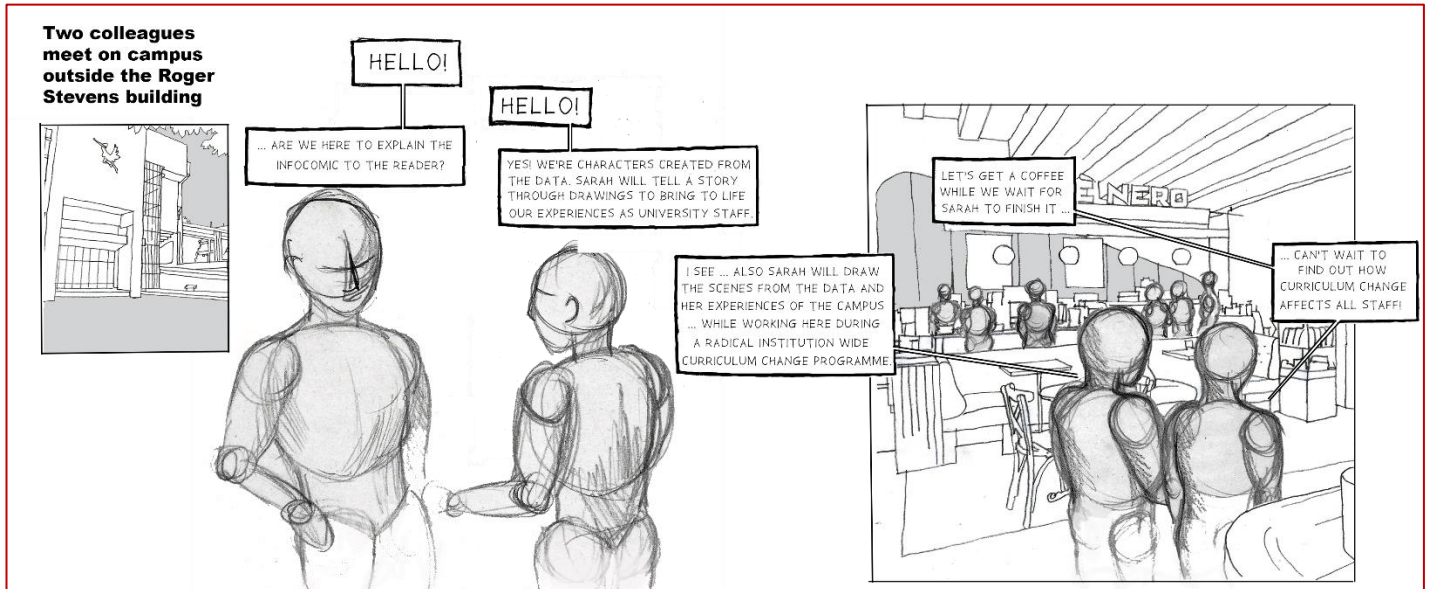
It would be good to:

- Develop context-sensitive communication strategies to bridge the gap between institutional vision and staff understanding, ensuring inclusivity and clarity across all areas, making CR for all staff.
- Regularly gather diverse staff feedback through participatory methods such as visual and reflective tools, ensuring their voices inform ongoing policy and practice development.
- Support and celebrate inclusive practices by prioritising strategies that address systemic barriers and enhance inclusivity, aligning institutional goals with the lived experiences of staff and students.
- Use innovative approaches such as learning journals and visual tools to deepen engagement, improve understanding of complex experiences, and promote shared ownership of institutional change.



Outputs (so far)

- LITE Methods mini-series podcast episode (scheduled for March 2025)
- Infocomic (2025)



Challenges

Most challenges arose from using a novel fully online method. This presented difficulties for some participants in navigating the technology and understanding how to use the platform. Additionally, the fear of being creative, and uncertainty about where to begin with questions designed for deep responses, hindered some participants' engagement. The start of data collection was delayed while waiting for a Minerva update (one that allowed participants to remain anonymous) and time needed to explain a new method to the ethics committee. Gathering rich data via a method that needed to be self-motivated proved too difficult and time-consuming for some participants. Self-selecting participants led to a heavy representation of academic staff, despite my aim to include all staff. Finally, I learnt that developing a real researcher-participant relationship is key to the success of learning journals. While I attempted to build this through introductory videos for each journal, combining online activities with face-to-face interactions would likely be more effective.

Next steps

Future research could include a longitudinal study to assess the long-term impact of CR on staff, students, and institutional practices, identifying areas for improvement. A comparative analysis of similar initiatives at other universities would provide context and highlight

effective strategies. Further investigation into the intersectionality of staff experiences, particularly for underrepresented groups and professional services staff, would help identify specific barriers. Expanding the use of visual and reflective methods to capture staff and student feedback could provide deeper insights into their engagement with curriculum reform. Additionally, research could explore how such findings influence the development of university policies, particularly around inclusivity, interdisciplinary teaching, and workload management. Finally, gathering student-centric perspectives would complement staff insights, ensuring a holistic view of educational policies affect both staff and students.

