

# Curriculum 2013: Two Subject Leaders Reflect on the Process

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In this paper we draw upon a conversation that took place on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2013 between Barbara Mitra, Subject Leader for BA Media & Cultural Studies, and Mehreen Mirza, Subject Leader for BA Sociology at University of Worcester<sup>1</sup>, in which we reflected upon the uncertain journeys that we undertook in rewriting our respective curricula to meet the requirements of Curriculum 2013 (C13).<sup>2</sup> The conversation reflected on the period from September 2012 to April 2013, when much of the paper-work was produced for C13.<sup>3</sup>

## Curriculum Development

The process of creating C13 has, in some ways, been one of the hardest and most challenging curriculum redesigns and revalidations that we have ever experienced as it was such a fundamental change to the way in which we have thought of our respective curricula in terms of structure, content, assessment and delivery.<sup>4</sup> Much has been written about how one ought to think about creating a curriculum to address contemporary concerns, ranging from curriculum design (Morgan and Houghton, 2011) and learning outcomes (Maher, 2004) to reflecting on an international curriculum (see Welikala, 2011). Much has also been written about the assessment strategies which could be adopted to meet the needs of the various stake-holders, be they students, potential employers or the wider community, as well as the way in which content should be delivered. These texts and training modules range from the 'How to ...' to the 'How *not* to ...' (see, for example, Chhem & Eng, 2001; Cullen et al., 2012; Fry et al., 2009; Hatzipanagos & Rochon, 2011; McKimm,

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<sup>1</sup> The views that are expressed in this paper are those of Barbara Mitra and Mehreen Mirza, and do not claim to represent those of the wider team members, the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts, or the University. The conversation was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We draw on parts of the conversation to illustrate some of our points.

<sup>2</sup> The University's principles and guidance on curriculum design can be found at:

<http://www.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/PrinciplesandGuidanceforDesignofUndergradCoursesURF.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The authors acknowledge the contribution made by the respective subject teams to the development of C13.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara and Mehreen have previously been involved in the reviews and revalidations of their undergraduate programmes in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

2007). Yet these texts do not capture the iterative process which we undertook to deliver the documentation for C13. We confess to a degree of uncertainty when we began the process. We pondered questions such as what would a curriculum with a minimum of four 30 credit modules look like, how would the optional modules fit in, what optional modules could and should complement the mandatory / designated modules at Levels 4 and 5, how could choice be maintained, how could flexibility be retained and extended and so on. Our curricula are not as we imagined they would be. They are leaner but more focused. There are fewer modules but with an element of choice and breadth retained through the inclusion of electives along with some creative sharing of modules, together with the development of provision for *Worcester Weeks*<sup>5</sup> at subject-, Institute- and Institutional-level. How did this come about?

Moir (2012) outlines some of the key forces which 'drive' the need for change in the curriculum: technology, globalisation, internationalisation, diversity of learners, and a 'curriculum for excellence'. From our perspective the development of C13 was mindful of these concerns, but it was much more than this. In previous curriculum rewrites for review and revalidation purposes we held a number of audiences in mind: the student body, our University, the QAA via its Subject Benchmarks, the external panel members and, of course, staff research interests. This rewrite of the curriculum appeared to be different; it seemed to be focused on internal audiences – the students, the University and colleagues – whilst still addressing the external requirements of meeting Subject Benchmarks and producing gradueness and employability amongst our students. This internal focus led to an iterative process whereby negotiation was the key. The process of negotiation with the internal stakeholders was the way in which we developed an understanding of what C13 would mean for us. There were of course certain precepts which had to be followed and there were certain elements of the curriculum which were prescribed, either in shape and/or content.

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<sup>5</sup> Worcester Weeks are a University-wide initiative where subject teams and Institutes can focus on alternative learning activities, such as research conferences, careers-fairs, inviting guest speakers to address cross-year groups (amongst others), to enrich the student experience.

BM: And we spent a lot of time discussing those issues really. What modules are going to be mandatory for Single honours and what modules in the second year are going to be mandatory or designated, [...] there was a lot of discussion about that and about the content as well of the modules. We spent a lot of time thinking about the content of those long 30 credit modules and what was essential and what wasn't essential and what should a Joint and Single honours programme look like. That was the kind of discussions we had really, rather than ..um..the kind of leanness and all the options and things we hadn't really discussed until it became apparent that we thought we won't be able to offer as many optional modules.

In some ways focusing on the process and the structures, and in engaging in 'horse-trading', for example, around shared modules between courses as well as the number of specialist modules staff might be permitted to have, allowed us to begin to imagine different ways of delivering the curricula and to escape the confines of traditional assessment patterns, and to embed more formative assignments/tasks.

MM: [O]ne of the things about Curriculum 13 was obviously the impact that it would have on assessment strategies as well and one of the things that I thought was interesting was the way in which everybody on their modules really thought hard about how they wanted the modules to be assessed.

BM: Oh yes.

MM: Because there would be implications if it was a 30 credit module and there would be implications in terms of word count ... it was just a completely different way of thinking about it really and so I was quite interested really in the way in which people thought about the assessment strategies they were going to adopt in order to meet their own learning outcomes which were also reduced in number.

BM: Yeah and I think as well it did give people the opportunity – who had maybe wanted to do something with the assessments but hadn't really had time to do it, so actually it made people revisit their

assessments actually and to think about how formative was going to be built in.

MM: Yes. [...] It actually made the team realise how much formative work they do without ever formally articulating the fact that we are doing this formative work anyway.

BM: I think we're actually not very good at being explicit about the things we do and the things we do well. We don't tend to vocalise those as much actually and I think erm it would also be good if students could also vocalise the things we do well...because.. I think.. there are a lot of things that are, you know, very positive and good on our courses.

C13 has, for us, *at present* resulted in a return to disciplinary boundaries and affiliations:

MM: I know multidisciplinary has many different meanings, but for me, having students do those [shared] modules actually was multidisciplinary in a really positive way.

BM: I think the [new] electives might attract students from throughout the University. Which is great and there'll be cross fertilisation of ideas, but, for example, students on Media and Cultural Studies being able to talk about Goffman and students from Sociology talking about Goffman, and both knowing who they mean, but coming at it from different angles and having applied Goffman in different ways.. I think that's where the benefit for the students really lay.

MM: [O]ne of the things that you and I have been talking about is how we could use Worcester Weeks as a way of bringing back that multidisciplinary that initially we may feel has been removed from the programmes.

Consequently, we have made a conscious decision to include a number of 'events' in each of the three Worcester Weeks, to run for the first time in 2013-14, which will 'speak' to both Media & Cultural Studies and Sociology students, as well as including

topics in the new *World Cultures* elective<sup>6</sup> which addresses both subjects, to ensure that multi-disciplinarity, as distinct from interdisciplinarity (see Barrett, 2013), does not disappear.

## **Moving Forwards**

Whilst initially sceptical of C13 we now feel that we have a sense of its shape and its direction. The next immediate challenge for us individually, as part of our subject teams and as members of the University, is to deliver C13 successfully, whilst recognising that the structure of new academic year to be rolled out in 2013-14 will bring its own challenges. We are aware that without doubt changes will need to be made to modules and assessment strategies as they go through their first run. However, putting aside those rather prosaic concerns, what we would like is to be in a situation where students-as-partners is a given, students as active and independent learners is the norm, research-informed teaching is embedded, employability underpins the modules, and we have attractive curricula which includes elements of multidisciplinary whilst retaining uniqueness. If we can go some way to meeting these goals, then the painful and difficult birthing of C13 will have been worth it.

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<sup>6</sup> The University of Worcester Electives can be found at <http://www.worc.ac.uk/journey/elective-modules.html>.

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### **Biographies:**

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**Barbara Mitra** is a Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts at the University of Worcester, and teaches on the BA Media & Cultural Studies programme. Her main research and teaching interests are in the areas of gender, new media and television and she is currently working on a book relating to the *Kays Catalogue* collection held at University of Worcester. She is also interested in teaching and learning in higher education and has published in this area. Barbara is a University of Worcester Teaching Fellow and is the co-editor of the *Worcester Journal of Learning and Teaching*.