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Amplifying the value of the third space to support strategic curriculum change

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Abstract

This case study presents how we at Kingston University have expanded our collaborative 'third space' to support the delivery of an ambitious blueprint of skills development in the curriculum. In 2022, Kingston embarked on an ambitious journey to roll out a progressive model of education through a new strategic initiative embedding personal and professional development for all undergraduate students as a core element of their course. This strategy was developed as a threefold response to an evolving education landscape in the UK. First, drawing on Kingston's 'Future Skills' research on skills and the economy to influence at a sector level (Kingston University, 2023). Second, as a response to the updated OfS conditions of registration (specifically the B3 conditions). Third, to enhance our existing commitment to equitable and inclusive support for students.

To enable the ambition of our institutional approach, we recognised the importance of ensuring colleagues across the institution felt visible and involved as we implemented this programme at pace. Through a deliberate curriculum and staff development project to accelerate and amplify wider staff understanding and confidence, we have successfully built upon and modelled the value of the third space for the benefit of both students and staff. We discuss how the scale of structural change involved with its delivery amplified our existing ways of working; it challenged us to upscale our approach and legitimise different forms of knowledge from both staff and students from different parts of the university. We conclude with some recommendations on how to maximise the potential and fluidity of the third space to deliver innovative large scale institutional curriculum change.

Keywords: third space; curriculum change; staff development; institutional change.

Introduction

Our institution has a deep commitment to inclusivity and equity for students within and beyond the classroom and has built a third space over a number of years to support our work in this area. Our third space reflects the changing nature of the workforce of higher education (Livingston and Ling, 2022), recognising the co-existence of colleagues on academic and professional services contracts who work as a team to deliver curriculum development support to enhance our student outcomes. Roles include educational and curriculum development academics, disciplinary experts, and a range of professional services colleagues who are provided with a space not just to co-exist but to share ideas and construct knowledge (Zeichner, 2010). Livingston and Ling (2022, p.657) see the opportunities in building connections in a landscape of increasing complexity in universities where 'third space workers and academic staff undertaking professional development and working side by side constitute a powerful force for the changes required within higher education'.

Over the past decade, our third space has supported student development and achievement holistically, creating a strong foundation which our strategic project amplified with the launch of our new strategy. Figure 1 illustrates the key developments in our third space since 2017. This case study outlines a strategic project undertaken between November 2022 and December 2023 which harnessed the power of the third space to support staff to embed our 'Future Skills' approach of embedding personal and professional development, graduate attributes, and institutional learning outcomes into the core curriculum across every undergraduate course at each level of study. Through this project, we were able to build on existing good practice in our own third space to amplify and accelerate the pace of change. We now discuss how.

Figure 1. Our evolving third space.
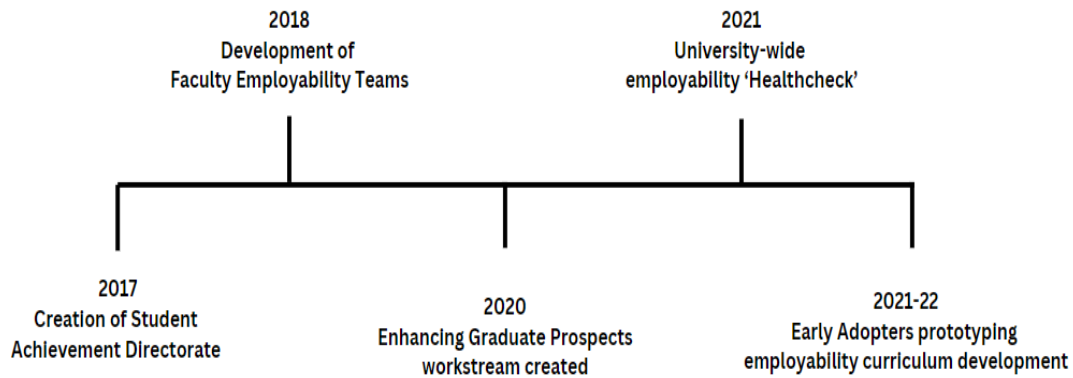
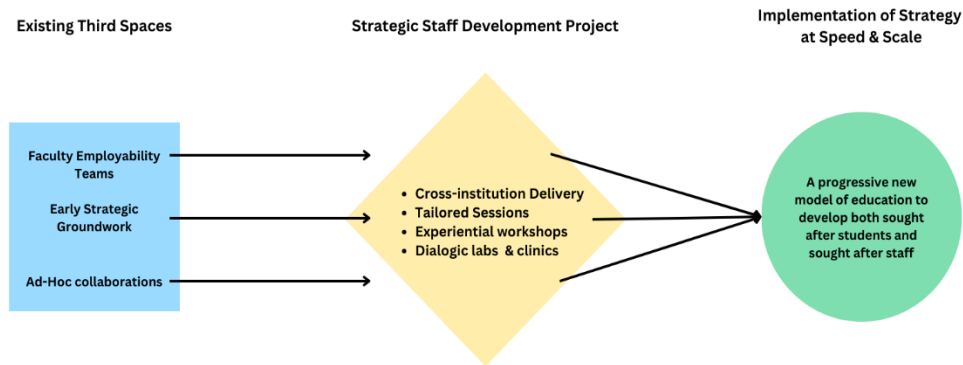## *Our approach*

Figure 2. Curriculum change approach.

Figure 2 summarises our approach to teaching personal and professional development for students, which is rooted in equitable and dialogic pedagogic theory and principles so that spaces within the curriculum are created which '...affirm [students'] presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics' (hooks, 1994, p.84). This approach aims to develop self-aware, confident, and reflective students, and ultimately graduates who will need these attributes for success in their professional lives.

It was imperative that we explicitly developed colleagues' metacognitive awareness of these approaches both as learners and facilitators of learning in an environment striving for equity. Therefore, we intentionally mirrored our approach with students with the learning spaces we developed for staff to encourage colleagues to '...be actively committed to a process of self-actualization ... to teach in a manner that empowers students' (hooks, 1994, p.15). Our approach encouraged educators to come to this development programme as a facilitator of learning using an active dialogic approach: 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow' (Freire, 1970, p.53).

Curriculum change is a 'highly complex social process which relates to individual, disciplinary and institutional identities and reflects the power relations within the academy' (Annala and Mäkinen, 2017, p.1954). To implement our strategy at speed and scale across the institution, we developed two institutional learning outcomes. These were designed to enable all students to develop key graduate attributes by exploring problems within and outside their disciplinary contexts as well as explicitly supporting their personal and professional development. Recognising the need for an equitable approach for our diverse student body, space was created in every programme for 'anchor' modules in which these learning outcomes and 15 credits equivalent of personal and professional development content were embedded at each level of the curriculum. We used the spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1960) to connect these anchor modules with other modules within the programme to enable a holistic and personalised approach.

To engage our academic colleagues with the enactment of these learning outcomes and to have ownership and agency in the curriculum change process, our approach connected top-down educational leadership with front line delivery (Howson and Kingsbury, 2021), intentionally integrating third space colleagues as the translators of the strategy. This integrated approach is summarised in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Integrated third space to support staff development.
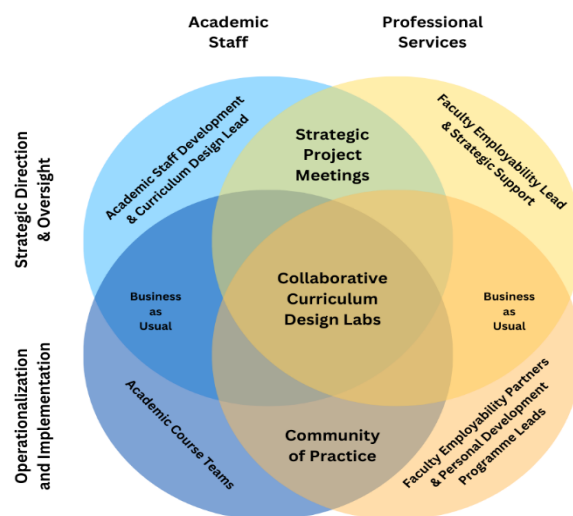
We drew on our third space of colleagues from central departments such as the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Centre, Careers and Employability, and Quality Assurance and Enhancement, who already had a strong track record of working in collaboration with course teams, to support with the translation of how to enact the learning outcomes in the curriculum. We were fortunate to be able to appoint a member of staff through a strategic secondment scheme to support the delivery of the strategy and build support and cross-institutional collaboration across all levels and roles. As a strategic project, we also had access to a workstream project manager to track key milestones and progress.

To support staff with such a large-scale change, we advocated for a discrete curriculum and staff development project within the strategy to support both academic and professional services colleagues with the operational changes required to embed institutional learning outcomes meaningfully in each course. The decision was made for this project to be co-led by the then Faculty Employability Lead (Annie Yonkers) and our Head of Curriculum Development and Enhancement (Dr Hilary Wason). These two roles, while located in different directorates in the university (students and academic services, respectively), and with different contractual obligations (professional services and academic, respectively), have complementary strategic objectives to realising curriculum change. As co-leads, we modelled the collaboration required and encouraged throughout the institution, and established a liminal space dedicated to preparing staff for such a large-scale change. We purposefully used the existing expertise across these directorates,

including the Academic Staff Development and Curriculum Development team, our Faculty Employability Partners, and Personal Development Programme Leads to deliver an ambitious programme of collaborative Curriculum Design Labs, a comprehensive staff development programme and a community of practice.

Collaborative curriculum labs and staff development programme

Due to the wide range of teaching contexts, we were keen to provide colleagues with a space to work through issues collectively about how the strategy could be implemented and to facilitate peer-to-peer dialogue in a situated manner around the discipline. Therefore, we implemented 12 collaborative Curriculum Design Labs in November and December 2022 for each disciplinary school. We created laboratory style spaces where 55 module leaders worked collaboratively with third space colleagues to infuse the institutional learning outcomes and to articulate pedagogically how these could be realised within their own teaching. By the end of these sessions, colleagues had drafted their module descriptors which articulated their own approaches to embedding and assessing the learning outcomes for approval through our quality assurance processes.

We gathered data in the labs about further training needs and used this to develop a comprehensive and tailored staff development programme of 24 sessions which ran between March and July 2023 and with 573 attendances. We used the expertise in our third space to tailor our existing staff development support, building on our suite of toolkits about assessment and feedback practice, inclusive pedagogies, dialogic teaching, critical thinking, and problem-based learning initiatives. Our third space colleagues collaboratively delivered experiential sessions which each focused on a particular aspect of realising the curricular elements of our strategy, for example design and delivery of authentic assessment.

We ran two off-site away days for 55 module leaders before the formal launch of our approach in September 2023. These were designed to build a sense of belonging and community amongst module leaders. Through a keynote organised by our Director of Student Development and Graduate Success, module leaders were exposed to how a similar programme was run in an international setting, illustrating the value of third space professionals in bringing additional perspectives to academics. Our Faculty Employability Partners have continued to support colleagues with the ongoing implementation of

personal and professional development in the curriculum, strengthening the community of practice between faculty academics and third space professionals. Finally, resources were curated within our Canvas VLE platform with videos, guides, and suggestions for implementation which staff can access and work through in a self-directed way. We have also set up a Module Leaders Microsoft Teams site where colleagues can engage remotely and share ideas and good practice.

The implementation was not without its challenges and highlighted the disruptive nature of curriculum change. First, there were varying levels of resistance from colleagues in the labs who felt that their disciplinary allegiances were being threatened by an institutional initiative. Second, some colleagues felt that change was being 'done' to them and they had no agency in the process. To overcome this, we acted as critical friends for module leaders as they designed their module specifications, supporting them to broaden their thinking of what was possible and that graduate attribute development could be infused within their existing disciplinary content, pedagogy, and assessment strategy.

Conclusion

This case study has discussed how Kingston University has significantly supported the delivery of an ambitious blueprint of skills development through amplifying the use of a well-established collaborative third space. By creating inclusive, democratic, and collaborative places for academics and professional services staff to work together to realise this project, we have forged a collective identity of colleagues who support faculty staff to change their curriculum. Our approach 'speaks to both the necessity of harnessing existing and creating new opportunities for critical collaboration within institutional contexts' (Abegglen et al., 2023, p.8).

Our third space project team integrated, enacted, and modelled our graduate attributes in the delivery of our programme of support, developing more self-aware and reflective educators at all levels within the institution. By acting as facilitators of learning, colleagues developed their confidence with understanding the strategy in their unique place in both their level and disciplinary context. This approach, through 'explicit, active engagement suggests alignment of top-down and bottom-up intent, and in some cases implementation and integration, with wider disciplinary and professional context[s] and possibly significant

transformational change' (Howson and Kingsbury, 2021, p.1861). We purposefully amplified our third space for this project where all colleagues felt like valued members of a team, even though their roles were located in different parts of the university, and we ensured that their contributions and different forms of knowledge were legitimised.

The impact of this approach is being realised over time, providing both colleagues who participated in the staff development programme and our third space colleagues who provided the critical role of 'translator' of the strategy, with opportunities to enhance their own practice and professional development. Colleagues have developed case studies of good practice about how they are enacting the pedagogical, student support, and assessment requirements to submit as part of their AdvanceHE fellowship applications. They are disseminating this practice at a range of conferences across different areas in the sector, including Careers and Employability, Curriculum Development, and Learning and Teaching (Abegglen et al., 2023). With the introduction of AdvanceHE's PSF 23 V5, which is centred around collaborative working, this work will provide colleagues with further evidence which they can use in their own professional development. We have seen positive impact on student results as well, with early assessment data from 2023-24 showing an almost 20% increase in average marks on an assessment linked to the institutional learning outcomes in a module led by a colleague who participated in several of the strategic development sessions.

Nevertheless, our approach was not without its challenges. The varying contextual nature of disciplinary teaching, module and student needs, professional body requirements, and at times varying commitment and engagement by faculty colleagues provided us with a steep learning curve. This was helped by the dialogic inquiry-based approach to the curriculum change process where Curriculum and Educational Developers, Faculty Employability Partners, Personal and Development Programme Leads, and Quality Assurance and Enhancement colleagues worked through challenges with faculty staff and highlights the need for such a partnership to deliver institutional curriculum change.

An additional barrier was finding a balance between the needs of academic and professional services staff within the third space who may not have had the opportunity to work together before, with different working schedules, locations, and job roles. We overcame these challenges by collaboratively designing session plans and resources for the labs and staff development workshops. We also provided taster sessions where we

tested out ideas, practised delivery, and learned from each other's perspectives before we launched the programme with faculty staff. We were able to leverage the knowledge gained from the unique placement of each of the roles within the third space to input into our support offer to meet the needs of our faculty colleagues. The collective delivery between Academic Staff Development colleagues and Faculty Employability Partners of our staff development programme was particularly noted as innovative and novel. Faculty staff enjoyed the changing speakers and the different perspectives colleagues in the third space could bring to the implementation of such an ambitious strategy.

Recommendations

From our experience leading a large-scale curriculum project, there are several recommendations that we would encourage readers to consider.

First, for third spaces to be effective, they need to be supported and modelled at many levels. The value of the third space at universities is likely to increase as priorities and staffing structures continue to evolve in the sector. 'The boundaries between professional staff, senior academic managers such as Pro Vice-Chancellors and Deans, and other academic staff have become less clear-cut...' (Whitchurch, 2006, p.162). As financial pressures grow on the sector, students, and staff, the complexities of the challenges we face are increasing every year. Universities need to develop liminal and third spaces with intention and empathy to enable collaboration and effective learning development to ensure deeper learning gain for the entire university community. In this case study, we modelled this at senior leadership, managerial, and operational levels, to ensure a continuum of collaboration and professional respect in this liminal space (see Figure 3).

Second, have a clear narrative of the benefit for staff for engaging and clear communication support from line management within faculties. This project surfaced challenges with staff development, namely a lack of engagement and resistance where faculty teams were not engaged. Through this project, we were able to identify these areas and some of the wider challenges with leadership and engagement. Consistent messaging, clear cascading of information, and encouragement of attendance by leadership to avoid an overreliance on the intrinsically motivated staff who engaged with our programme frequently is recommended.

Third, as a leader of a strategic project, you are a facilitator of learning. Link programmes such as these more explicitly with staff's own development goals, and leverage opportunities to support third space colleagues. Encourage colleagues to align their efforts to the Professional Standards Framework and develop their own case studies and good practice for AdvanceHE fellowships (or similar). Support colleagues to use these opportunities to share knowledge across the university and use dialogic principles to encourage collaboration.

Lastly, celebrate the value of support staff who manage the project and set clear outputs. As a strategic project, we had access to both a project manager as well as a member of our team seconded in to support the strategy. Both roles played a fundamental part in the ongoing support and delivery of our programme in terms of organising and managing deliverables and analysing data.

As we move forward, we are taking key learnings from our project and embedding them into our business as usual across our areas of work. Through this project, we established more robust communication and collaboration channels across the institution and a shared vocabulary through our graduate attributes and learning outcomes to streamline how we support both staff and students at scale. We are continuing our commitment to equity and inclusion in the face of extremely complex challenges in our institution, the sector, and beyond.

While our ultimate measure of success for this project will be aligned to the B3 conditions, in particular progression to graduate outcomes, we are planning on drawing insight from many other metrics to investigate lead indicators of success, including continuation and completion, but also our own metrics drawn from Careers Registration surveys and students' self assessments. Insights from these data points will also support our ability to continuously reflect and improve how we support colleagues over time.

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