# 'RELAVANCE'
# OF
# CURRICULUM
# AT THE PRE – UNIVERSITY LEVEL.

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Pre-University is a very important stage in the academic life of a student. It is a stage from which the student makes a choice of his/her career. Hence, extreme care has to be taken in designing an appropriate curriculum that ensures that the students get the right knowledge, skills and attitude to choose a career of their liking.

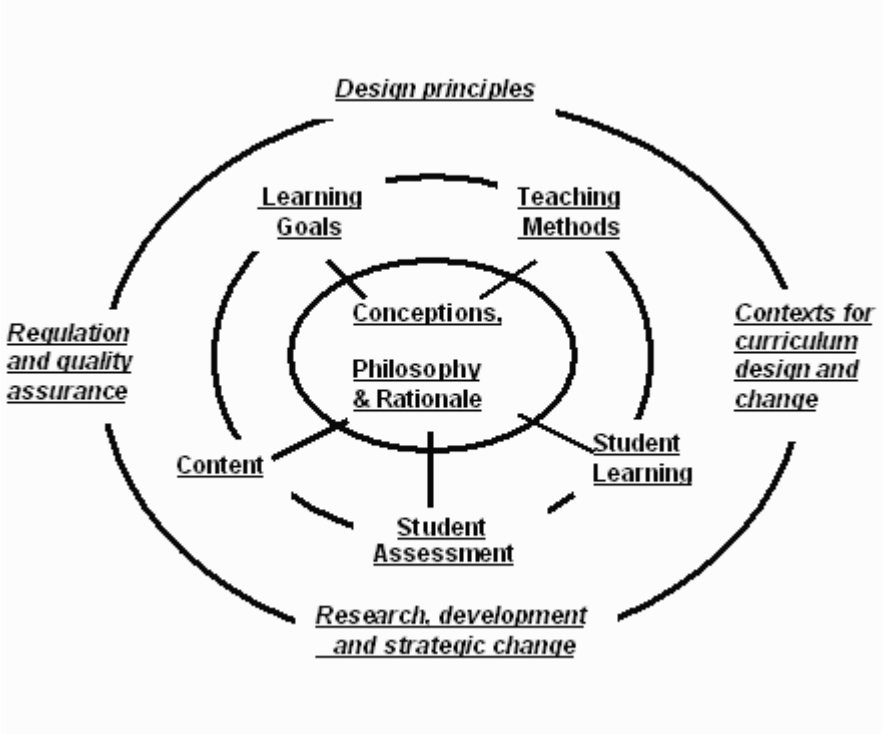
## WHAT IS A CURRICULUM?

For most of us without a background in education, a curriculum often means a sequence of lectures, teaching timetables, examination sessions and grading. Occasionally, a curriculum can also turn into a turf battle with different departments vying for increased teaching hours for their particular discipline.

But a curriculum is more than just sequences of lectures and timetables. A curriculum is said to be "a planned educational experience". Hence, the main intention of curriculum design at the tertiary level is to foster the academic development of students. Once a specific group of students is identified for whom the curriculum is to be designed, the purpose for the curriculum design can then be made clear from the outset.

There are many variables involved in designing a curriculum and they are all connected.

This model of a curriculum can be applied at the level of the whole curriculum (course or programme) or the individual curriculum building blocks (units or modules).




If a curriculum is to be "a planned educational experience", then curriculum design and implementation should follow a sequence of steps that operates like an upward and downward spiral with a robust feedback system for the adjustment of each step.

Curriculum planning can be divided into 6 steps:

**1. Identification of the mission and the needs of its stakeholders**

This is the crucial first step as it is important to understand the mission for which the curriculum is designed. For example, the mission of a Science

curriculum is to train students to develop scientific temper. Consequently, curriculum developers must know and understand the needs of curriculum stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty members, university administrators, professional bodies, government, etc.) that will determine the type of graduate profile:

- *possesses a sound scientific basis to appreciate science;*
- *possesses high scientific competence;*
- *possesses critical analytical skills;*
- *is capable of self-directed & life-long learning;*
- *possesses good communication skills;*
- *is compassionate and ethical.*

**2. Needs assessment of the learners**

This step is often neglected. Once the potential students are identified, their needs must be assessed, because curriculum developers must be aware of the learners' strengths and weaknesses. Therefore data on student characteristics are needed (e.g. entry level of competence, ability to meet the prerequisites of the programme, individual goals and priorities, personal background and reasons for enrolling, attitudes about discipline and assumptions about the programme).

**3. Establishment of the curriculum's goals and objectives**

This is an important step as goals and objectives determine the instructional philosophy and thus guide the selection of the most effective learning methods. Moreover, the learning objectives will also determine the design and selection of assessment instruments and procedures. As

clear and well-written objectives are absolutely necessary to define the focus of the curriculum, faculty members in charge of curriculum design must be formally trained in writing instructional objectives.

**4. Selection of educational strategies**

The selection of educational strategies must be based on three main principles. First, the educational methods must be congruent with the learning objectives. Second, the use of multiple educational methods is preferable to a singular method, as the curriculum should respond to the challenges of the multitude of students' learning styles and varied educational objectives. Finally, the curriculum designer and implementer must verify the curriculum's feasibility in terms of material and human resources.

**5. Implementation of the new curriculum**

Designing the curriculum is the most exciting and creative part of curriculum development. However, the ultimate goal is not to design the best and ideal curriculum, but to put it into practice successfully. The many conditions and requirements for successful execution include the promotion of faculty members' ownership of the process of curriculum implementation and the allocation of adequate resources. Unequivocal support from the highest academic authority must be secured before starting to put a new curriculum into operation. Following the first phase of implementation of the new programme, a formal assessment must be carried out in order to adjust the process and to establish a link between institutional goals, courses and curriculum.

**6. Evaluation and feedback to improve the curriculum**

Although evaluation of the curriculum is the last step in this practical approach, it is not necessarily the final action. The evaluation data collected must serve as criteria for adjusting the curriculum to the goals of the programme or the mission of the Faculty. The most important message here is that a curriculum must be evaluated, corrected and go through repeated levels of innovation because it is not a static system. Feedback from teachers, tutors and students must continuously be taken into serious consideration so as to enhance the learning outcomes for the students.

In conclusion, a curriculum is an academic plan. It is a total blueprint for actions where:

a. *the objectives, aims and outcome of the curriculum are clarified;*

*b. the processes to achieve these are identified;*

*c. the ways to measure whether success has been achieved; and*

*d. systematic review and adjustment are also part of the plan.*

## WHAT IS RELEVANCE?

It is always essential to ponder as to why the curriculum is being designed. The curriculum must serve a purpose. Identifying that purpose and ensuring that the purpose is served well gives a frame of relevance.

In workshops and private consultations, I have asked a large number of teachers where they start while planning a new course. Typically the response is that they begin with organising their content (i.e. what topics they plan to teach and the sequence in which they will be taught). On the

surface, this seems like a reasonable place to start. However, implicit in this organisation of content are assumptions about the purposes of the course; and unless these assumptions about the purposes are made explicit, the course runs the risk of failing to fit into the wider curriculum, as well as institutional and social context.

Asking questions like those following can help the lecturer to clarify the purpose of the course and better prepare the teacher to deal with various expectations:

- *Who are the various stakeholders of this course?*
- *How does this course fit into the larger picture? Why would students be interested in this course? What function does it play in respect to society, the degree programme, etc.?*
- *Where does this course fit in a course programme sequence: What came before? What comes after? What is the rationale for its position? Is this course foundational (i.e. an essential prerequisite for subsequent work), compulsory or optional?*
- *Who else is involved in planning and teaching? Who has overall responsibility?*
- *What weight does this course actually carry in the overall course? How important is it perceived by staff/students?*
- *How is this course viewed in the institutions where it is administered?*
- *What is the prior history of this course?*

A course attains respectability and acceptance by the extent of its relevance. Does the curriculum provide enough inputs about what is happening in the society? Does it make the student understand where and how the knowledge gained through the curriculum applied? If the curriculum is not relevant to the immediate and long term needs of the student, it only serves to be of academic interest and fails to kindle enthusiasm and the very purpose of studying gets defeated.

**Conclusion**

A successful course is unlikely to be the outcome of a teacher simply spending an hour or two writing a course outline or carefully reading the course textbook (though both are worthwhile planning activities). A great course is more likely the result of a long continuous effort of thinking, researching and reflecting upon the issues of what is the purpose of the course, who are the learners and what constitutes learning, what methods of instruction are suitable and how do you implement them in a given context, what assessment procedures are appropriate, what content should be included and how should the course be evaluated. By recording these ideas in a document, they can be shared with colleagues, students and other stakeholders so that they too can contribute to further planning and development of the course. Consequently, the gap between best practice in planning and individual practice is not an unbreachable chasm, but merely a journey one can take to improve the quality of teaching and learning in any university.

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