

Thought Leadership

# Why effective curriculum management is now a strategic 'must-have' for higher education institutions

## About this paper

This pioneering thought leadership paper, developed by CourseLoop in partnership with the University of Southern Queensland and Durham University, explores the core drivers behind the increasing prioritisation and adoption of curriculum management as an enabler of agility and efficiency, the risk and impact of universities continuing to use manual processes to manage curriculum, and what it takes to secure a positive return on investment.



# About our contributors



**Lyn Alderman**

**Dean of Academic Transformation, University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ)**

As the Dean of Academic Transformation, Lyn is responsible for leading the development and implementation of university-wide initiatives and technologies that strengthen education quality, learning and teaching, and the student experience. The University of Southern Queensland is an Australian university with a track record of delivering distance and online learning and has been using CourseLoop since 2019.



**James Crooks**

**CIO, Durham University**

James is the Chief Information Officer at Durham University, with overall responsibility for digital strategy and the delivery of information and technology services. James has over 20 years of experience in technology leadership and service delivery roles across multiple sectors. James also serves as Trustee and Deputy Chair of UCISA, the membership organisation dedicated to supporting and enabling digital and technology leaders, practitioners and their teams in higher and further education.

# Foreword

Back in 2014, as the CIO at RMIT, I was searching for a fit-for-purpose solution to address the challenges of end-to-end curriculum management. When I realised that a true curriculum management platform didn't exist, I began to design what I consider a 'proper' solution, and CourseLoop was born.

Since those early days, I've witnessed firsthand the higher education sector mature and evolve to address the changing expectations of students and respond to significant macro- and micro-environmental challenges. Over the past decade, as universities have continued to adapt and grow, I've seen effective curriculum management become a strategic 'must-have' for institutions. I fully expect this trend to continue, especially in the UK, where the sector faces unprecedented challenges.

For me, the growing demand for 'proper' curriculum management solutions globally stems from the fact that a university's curriculum is effectively its core product – and the ability to strategically manage the curriculum underpins agility and an institution's ability to differentiate itself from other universities. However, this paper isn't about my views on curriculum management. I'm delighted to provide a conduit for the latest thinking on the subject and to introduce our contributors, Lyn and James, two experts in the field, addressing the challenges of end-to-end curriculum management.

From me and everyone here at CourseLoop from our new home in TechnologyOne, thank you to our brilliant contributors and to UCISA for its support in publicising this paper.

We hope the insights within this paper support you in making the case for better curriculum management at your institution.

*Brian*



**Brian Clark, CourseLoop Founder and now  
Product General Manager – Curriculum, TechnologyOne**

## An introduction from UCISA's CEO

Knowledge, understanding, and collaboration are critical to change and innovation. So we're delighted to collaborate with CourseLoop, our 2024 Outstanding Corporate Member of the Year, in the publication of this paper at a time of immense challenge for our sector.

Our members know that a university's curriculum (and data) is its cornerstone; the foundation upon which everything else is built. Improving the way institutions manage their curriculum is therefore crucial for students, staff and the higher education industry as a whole.

Thank you to CourseLoop for the opportunity to be involved in this important conversation and thank you to our contributors, James and Lyn, for sharing their honest and timely insights about why curriculum management is so important right now.

*Deborah*



**Deborah Green, UCISA CEO**

## What is prompting universities to look at the way they manage their curriculum?

Funding gaps, financial sustainability and profitability, domestic and international recruitment shortfalls, curriculum regulation and compliance – these are just some of the core challenges facing universities today.

James from Durham University explains:



More and more UK universities are looking for avenues to be sustainable and survive. Curriculum management will become increasingly strategic as universities seek to commercialise their curriculum in order to attract and retain more diverse student cohorts.

The financial challenge for universities has never been as prominent as it is today. And the competition for student places, particularly international students, has never been more important. If we can't maintain efficient and effective business operations, then we're not financially sustainable.

Curriculum is a fundamental building block of an institution's product. It helps students understand our courses and how they align to their aspirations, outputs and achievements upon completion. Curriculum is everything; it's why students come.

For Durham University, the curriculum sits at the heart of the University's administrative activities and to manage and govern it appropriately requires a huge amount of manual process and activity. The push towards better curriculum management enables the University to become more agile and dynamic, improving its ability to adapt and pivot quickly.



The single biggest problem facing universities in terms of curriculum management is also one of the single biggest problems facing the broader student landscape; a legacy of doing things for the right reasons but not in the best way. Over time, our curriculum has evolved in organic and creative ways so we've organically grown and creatively developed processes to manage that curriculum, but we're not as dynamic as we could be. We know we need an efficient digital curriculum process if we are to compete in an increasingly competitive environment.

**James Crooks, CIO, Durham University**


Lyn from the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) is quick to highlight that the Australian higher education sector has also faced financial challenges. For UniSQ, the decision to transform its legacy curriculum management processes was driven by a need to improve its curriculum product and compliance to bolster student recruitment. Lyn explains:



We were seeing declining enrolment numbers, so cleaning up our product was imperative. We sought (and with CourseLoop, we now have) cleaner curriculum structures to support strategic decision making and enhanced delivery.

In Australia, universities get reviewed every seven years by a tertiary education regulator (TEQSA). And in 2018, UniSQ were encouraged to improve the evidence available to support curriculum decision making. We also have an Australian Higher Education Standards Framework which requires external reference points and benchmarks for program reviews.

When I joined the University as a quality expert in 2019, I was tasked to design a curriculum quality framework to meet all other ongoing Higher Education Standards' quality assurance requirements. I knew we needed two things – an auditable process for curriculum approvals and a comprehensive review system – both of which are critical components of a true curriculum management system.

A young woman with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue denim jacket over a striped shirt, is sitting at a desk. She is looking down at a notebook, holding a pen in her right hand and resting her chin on her left hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

**For UniSQ, the decision to transform its legacy curriculum management processes was driven by a need to improve its curriculum product and compliance to bolster student experience and recruitment.**



## Why universities are making curriculum management a priority

Curriculum data is the number one challenge universities look to curriculum management solutions to solve. Poor data management reduces integration capability and institutional agility while increasing risk, uncertainty and manual effort. With universities handling huge volumes of information, it is mission-critical that curriculum data is highly structured and made available for downstream integration.

For Lyn at UniSQ, the prioritisation of curriculum management has provided a vehicle for strategic decision making and bolstered efficiency and innovation capability.



Our access to data was very poor. We interviewed seventy staff and they were frustrated. They couldn't say if they were doing a good job or poor job because they had little to no access to program and course data. When you're building a quality assurance framework you need to be able to see what's going on and who's doing what. You need to see what's been tinkered with, how much time is being wasted, and how much churn there is. Without that, you can't see the quantum of change.

End-to-end curriculum management also supports innovation capability and cost efficiency. Being able to determine which programs are growing, and which are standing still, allows universities to quickly create new courses, invest in high performing ones, and switch off stagnant offerings. In short, effective curriculum management becomes a vehicle for strategic decision making.

We had too much curriculum and too few students. So we set up an evaluation team to conduct qualitative research of each discipline. At the middle of it all was our new curriculum management system, CourseLoop, that could track and trace everything - making it the vehicle for our strategic decision making.



# Curriculum management as THE enabler



Curriculum management is the enabler and the solution to a lot of our problems. But it's a 'behind the scenes' enabler, so it's difficult to quantify the risks and therefore hard to secure the investment we need to improve it.

**Durham University**

For Durham University, James also sees curriculum management as a core data component. But he also acknowledges that quantifying outcomes and making the business case can be difficult:



Curriculum management is an enabler and the solution to lots of our problems. But it's a behind-the-scenes enabler, so it's difficult to quantify the risks and it can, therefore, be hard to secure the investment we need to improve it.

Part of making the business case is about clearly defining what we mean by 'curriculum'. Because curriculum isn't academic content; it's the framework through which content is delivered to support the student journey. It's the module, course and assessment patterns. But you can't manage this core data asset alone, you need to also think about the marketing content that makes up the full curriculum picture.



# The impact of inaction and failing to adapt

While making the business case for curriculum management transformation isn't without its challenges, the argument for change is compelling. Not least because inaction is likely to have devastating consequences for institutions, as James explains:



There's an increasing amount of competition for a diminishing number of students. At worst, we'll see an acceleration of universities going out of business, or having to merge with other universities to avoid extinction.

If we do nothing about curriculum management, we'll lose students and market share and become irrelevant, which is a huge financial risk given that students represent a core income. If we can't adapt, we'll lose our competitive edge.

And of course, it's not just about the market and the students. James also points out that the manual curriculum processes and interventions place a strain on administrative staff.



If we don't have a fit-for-purpose digital solution, staff will become disillusioned, morale will be dented and people will start to leave. Then we'll end up with a skills and retention gap. Our people are so important, but if work is repetitive and stressful and they can't see a connection between their work and the mission of the university, they'll go elsewhere.



In terms of curriculum management, we were behind the sector anyway – we had that false sense of security that regional universities can sometimes have. All other universities were moving to curriculum systems. So, we had to leap ahead and demonstrate best practice and meet external standards.

**Lyn Alderman, Dean of Academic Transformation, UniSQ**

# The risks of manually managing your curriculum

## 1. No single source of truth

When curriculum information doesn't come from a single trusted source, it increases administrative overhead, reduces the ability to automate tasks and integrate data with other downstream systems, and creates real challenges for maintaining change history and data accuracy. In short, the absence of a single source of curriculum truth reduces visibility and efficiency, all while elevating institutional risk.

Increasingly, universities are trying to become more data-driven in management decisions. But if our core data isn't consistent, we can't make well-informed strategic decisions about course profiles and new courses. So we're not giving the executive team the right information to make the right decisions.

**James Crooks, Durham University**

## 2. No auditable approval and review process

When workflows aren't streamlined, automated, and transparent, approval processes grind slowly through an institution, reducing collaboration, making it hard to ensure academic oversight, and placing curriculum quality and accreditation at risk.

Without an audit trail, we simply wouldn't know what was happening with our curriculum. Doing an evaluation of the curriculum approvals used to take 150 hours of work – with CourseLoop, I can now do it with one single printout.

**Lyn Alderman, UniSQ**

## 3. Limited institutional agility

The future of curriculum management is about being able to respond dynamically to changes in the market, changes in government and changes in policy much more effectively. Becoming more dynamic and agile would also be fantastic for the reputation of the UK Higher Education sector.

**James Crooks, Durham University**

# How the right platform, process and partner are critical to securing a positive return on investment



Our expectation was that the cost of CourseLoop would become a neutral expense in 5 years through increased efficiencies.

**UniSQ**

James believes curriculum management isn't just a technology project but a wider business project. As such, the biggest challenge is trying to change legacy systems and, at the same time, change years of doing things in a certain way. And while Durham University is still early in its curriculum management journey, the University also recognises the importance of working with an external partner to leverage benefits and learn from others:

**"Universities are realising it makes sense to work with a small number of strategic partners, rather than just buying technology from many different technology providers. Curriculum touches every area of the organisation, so it has to be a partnership. Technology is one aspect, but the far bigger part is around changing process."** James Crooks

For UniSQ, regulation requirements meant it had to improve its approach to curriculum decision-making. In a previous role, Lyn had seen a project with a startup go terribly wrong costing another university millions of dollars. So she had done her research and knew exactly what she was looking for in a curriculum management system:

**"I looked at all different systems internationally. Some were cheaper but didn't give us what we needed. Procurement is often about value for money – but value for money isn't about the cost – it's about reduced risk to the organisation. CourseLoop stood out because they reduced the risk and increased our ability to meet external standards."** Lyn Alderman

And while James cites financial pressure as one of the factors stopping UK universities make the change: **"There are so many demands on university finances and these projects are costly, not just in terms of the new system, but in the change management and resources required"**, Lyn believes that prior to digitalisation, UniSQ had been overdelivering for so long, that the cost efficiencies were worth the investment: **"Our expectation was that the cost of CourseLoop would become a neutral expense in 5 years through increased efficiencies."**

# Adding value to the staff and student experience

For UniSQ, the implementation of CourseLoop has offered game-changing capability when it comes to the use of data downstream. Below, Lyn describes how the University has leveraged CourseLoop to add significant value to the staff and student experience.

## 1. Recommended Enrolment Pattern Tool

“UniSQ has developed a Recommended Enrolment Pattern (REP) Tool using curriculum data and structures fed downstream by CourseLoop. When data, such as full-time or part-time enrolment, delivery mode and different enrolment points, are updated in the CourseLoop Platform, the REPs are updated immediately through automation. Now, it only takes us 10 minutes to rerun REPs. Incredible.”

## 2. PowerBI Dashboards

“We built a dashboard that allows time-poor Heads of Schools to compare approved curriculum data with proposed changes and edits at a glance. By removing the need to enter each course specification and compare changes manually, we’ve seen a huge improvement in efficiency. Additionally, our other PowerBI dashboards help display timetabling requirements, assessment heatmaps across teaching periods and courses, and more.”

## 3. Institutional Monitoring and Reporting

“The CourseLoop Platform is invaluable in helping UniSQ meet external regulatory requirements. CourseLoop data is used within program-level reports to demonstrate changes to curriculum over time, curriculum structures and inherent requirements. CourseLoop’s Curriculum Review module also offers a repository for annual, interim and comprehensive program reviews and action plans for courses at each teaching period, supporting ongoing institutional compliance.”

# Why choose CourseLoop as your partner?

We're very proud that customers tell us that our partnership approach is a breath of fresh air. Couple that with our game-changing platform, and it's easy to see why we've never lost a customer. With a team of people who have held senior positions in leading universities, we understand curriculum management inside out - it's why the universities we work with tell us that we get it and, more importantly, get them ...

"CourseLoop is a standout platform that gives you revolutionary change and has allowed us to turn off four end-of-life technology systems. It's the answer to the automation of business that every university has to do."

**Lyn Alderman, Dean of Academic Transformation, University of Southern Queensland**

"Defining the people, process, organisational, and technology requirements to address the challenges of end-to-end curriculum management takes considerable effort, alongside a level of domain expertise only gained through experience. CourseLoop's growing presence in the UK Higher Education sector means they have relevant and unrivalled real-world experience scoping and implementing large-scale curriculum management projects. The outstanding discovery project CourseLoop has led at the University of Greenwich gives me confidence that we're making informed decisions at every juncture, which will ultimately help us realise value faster."

**Paul Butler, CIO, University of Greenwich**

"Addressing the challenges associated with curriculum management is critical to the delivery of strong student outcomes. Luckily, in CourseLoop, we have found a partner with the perfect blend of tech and sector expertise to help us confidently tackle these challenges and realise the benefits of digital transformation in end-to-end curriculum management."

**Professor Clare Milsom, Registrar & Chief Operating Officer, Liverpool John Moores University**

## Ready to take the first step on your curriculum management journey?

Since 2016, we've been helping universities address the challenges of institution-wide curriculum management to realise significant operational and strategic gains for the benefit of staff and students. Get in touch today with a team that truly understands your world.

**[hello@courseloop.com](mailto:hello@courseloop.com)**

*Simply better*

For Academics. For Registry. For IT. For Students.

# About CourseLoop

CourseLoop allows institutions to capture complex and ever-changing curriculum data in a definitive source of truth. With unrivalled functionality, seamless integration, and the ability to leverage data across functional boundaries, CourseLoop is a game-changer.



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