

From Knowledge to Skills?

Industry Engagement and Curriculum Design in Practice

- A reflective, practice-informed perspective
- Grounded in curriculum development and validation experience
- An invitation to dialogue — not a definitive account

Why This Matters Now

Graduate employability has moved from aspiration to institutional imperative — reshaping how universities design, validate and evaluate their curricula.

POLICY

Policy Landscape

Graduate Outcomes surveys, TEF metrics and league table rankings have made employability a measurable performance indicator, not just an aspiration.

STRUCTURE

Structural Embedding

Industry engagement is no longer optional enrichment — it is increasingly written into validation frameworks, accreditation standards and QA documentation.

LANGUAGE

'Job-Ready' Graduates

The language of 'work-readiness' and 'professional competence' now appears in programme aims, module descriptors and marketing copy — raising questions about what universities are for.

Discussion: Does this feel like a recent shift, or a long-standing tension in your own context?

What Counts as 'Industry Engagement'?

The term covers a wide spectrum — from light-touch consultation to structural co-design. Understanding where your institution sits on that spectrum matters.

01

Curriculum Design and Validation

Employer advisory boards, Industry consultation during programme approval, co-design workshops shaping learning outcomes and assessment.

02

Teaching and Learning

Guest lectures and practitioner input, industry-led modules or teaching sessions, use of real-world case studies and datasets

03

Work-Integrated Learning & Placements

Placements, internships, and sandwich years, live industry projects and consultancy briefs, cooperative education (alternating study and work terms)

04

Assessment & Feedback

Employer input into assessment design, industry judging of student projects or presentations, feedback from placement providers or mentors

Industry engagement is no longer peripheral — it is increasingly structural.

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05

Partnership & Co-Creation

Degree apprenticeships (co-designed and co-delivered)
industry mentorship schemes and project supervision
long-term strategic partnerships shaping programmes

06

Wider Ecosystem Engagement

Alumni as industry representatives
careers services
embedding employer insight into curriculum
knowledge exchange, consultancy, and research partnerships

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Curriculum Work in Practice

Anonymised Observations from Practice

- **Learning Outcomes:**
Increasingly framed around demonstrable skills and competencies — often mapped to national qualification frameworks or employer-defined standards.
- **Validation Questions:**
Panel members routinely ask 'what will graduates be able to do?' and 'how does this prepare students for employment?' — sometimes at the expense of disciplinary rationale.
- **Evidence of Industry Input:**
Documentation increasingly expected to include letters of support, employer consultation records or advisory board minutes, regardless of discipline.
- **Module-Level Pressure:**
Individual module leaders report being asked to reframe assessments and content to demonstrate 'real-world relevance', even in foundational or theoretical modules.

Key Message

Curriculum work is shaped as much by external expectations as by disciplinary priorities.

A note on methodology

These observations are drawn from direct experience of programme design, validation panels, and curriculum review processes. They are illustrative, not exhaustive — and deliberately anonymised to protect institutional and individual contexts.

Knowledge vs Skills: A Persistent Tension

This is not a new debate — but current policy conditions are sharpening it in particular ways.

Disciplinary Knowledge

- Theoretical depth
- Conceptual frameworks
- Historical & critical context
- Research methodology
- Intellectual tradition

Transferable Skills

- Communication & collaboration
- Problem-solving & analysis
- Digital literacy
- Ethical reasoning
- Self-directed learning

Professional Competencies

- Sector-specific practice
- Occupational standards
- Regulatory compliance
- Industry tools & workflow
- Employer-defined outcomes

What knowledge is considered essential — and what quietly becomes optional?

What Gets Gained

Industry engagement can genuinely add value — this is not a rejection of it.

01

Stronger Professional Links

Students gain access to real networks, live briefs, guest practitioners and work-based learning that genuinely enriches their education and post-graduation transitions.

02

Clearer Graduate Outcomes

Programmes become more explicit about what students will be able to do — improving coherence, reducing vagueness in outcomes, and making the value of a degree more legible.

03

Student Confidence & Motivation

Relevance matters to learners. When students can see a pathway from their studies to practice, engagement and retention can improve significantly.

04

Mutual Benefit

Well-designed partnerships benefit employers too — access to fresh talent, research collaboration, and the opportunity to shape the professionals of tomorrow.

What Might Be Lost

These are not certainties — they are questions worth sitting with.

Space for Theoretical Depth

When every module must justify itself in terms of employability, foundational or theoretical content can be marginalised — even when it underpins the very skills employers say they want.

Critical and Challenging Knowledge

Knowledge that questions industry orthodoxies, disrupts comfortable assumptions, or introduces ethical complexity may be viewed as 'irrelevant' — yet it is often what university education uniquely offers.

Long-Term Disciplinary Development

Disciplines evolve through scholarship, peer critique and slow accumulation. Courses designed primarily for current employer need may struggle to keep pace with — or help shape — future practice.

Academic Autonomy

The gradual externalization of curriculum decisions — who decides what to teach, when, and how — raises fundamental questions about the independence of higher education institutions.

Discussion: Are these trade-offs inevitable — or are they design choices we can make differently?

Emerging Questions

These sit at the heart of the current debate — and deserve more than quick answers.

1

Who decides what knowledge is valuable?

When employers, professional bodies and QA frameworks all have a stake, what role remains for disciplinary scholars, students, or critical pedagogues in shaping what is taught?

2

How much industry influence is appropriate?

Influence exists on a spectrum from consultation to co-ownership. At what point does collaboration become capture? And who is responsible for holding that line?

3

How do academics retain curricular agency?

In increasingly managerial institutions, the academic's role as curriculum author is shifting. What structures — governance, policy, professional identity — can protect meaningful agency?

4

Whose interests does 'employability' serve?

Graduate employability metrics favour short-term, measurable outcomes. But universities have always served broader purposes — civic, intellectual, cultural. How do we hold these in tension?

An Invitation to Dialogue

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Do these experiences resonate?

What parallels — or contrasts — do you notice in your own context?

Where do you see tensions or opportunities?

Are there moments where industry engagement has enriched or constrained your practice?

What would 'good' look like?

If we designed industry engagement intentionally, what principles should guide it?

Thank you for listening