Unseen, Essential, Transformative

The hidden processes behind curriculum



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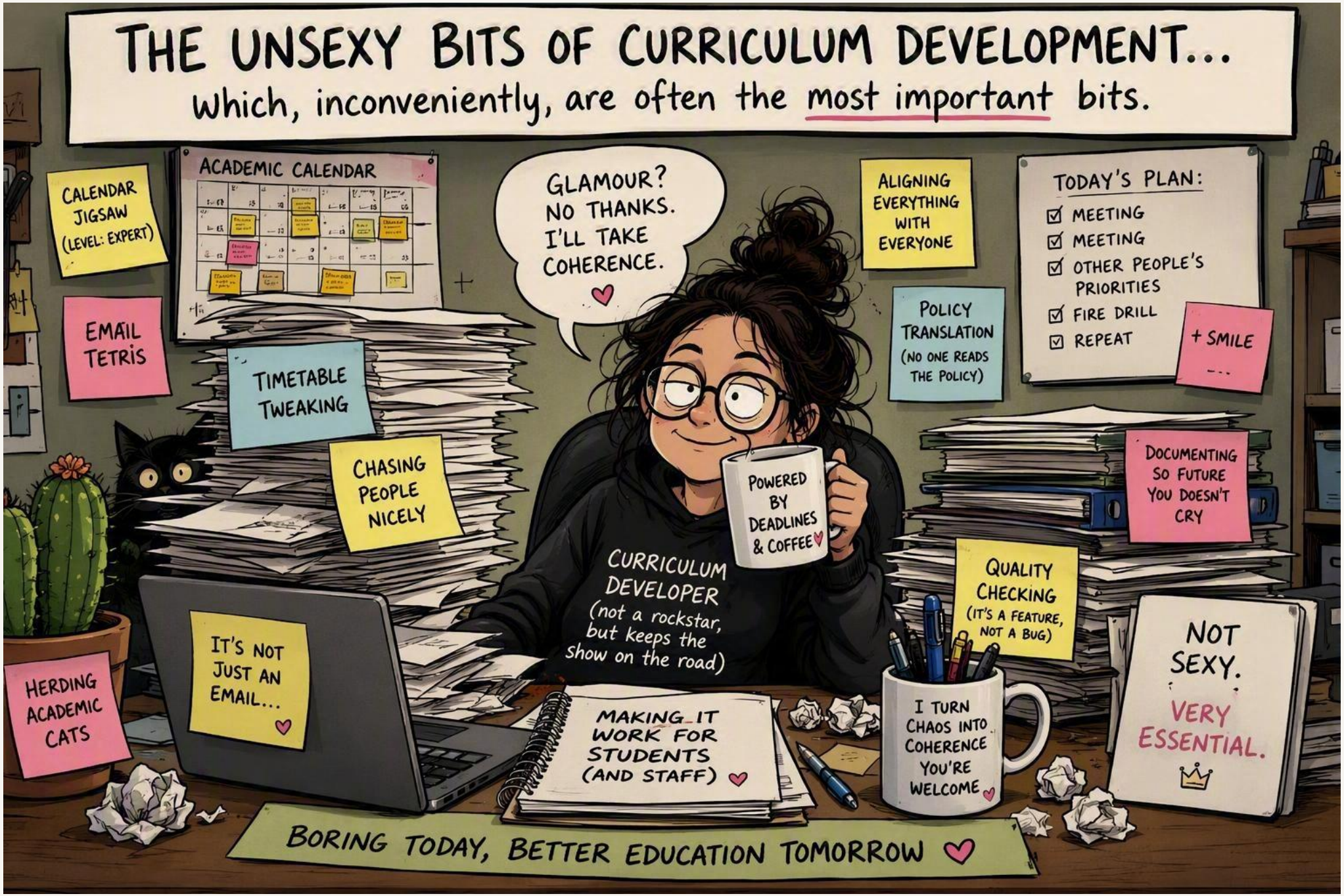
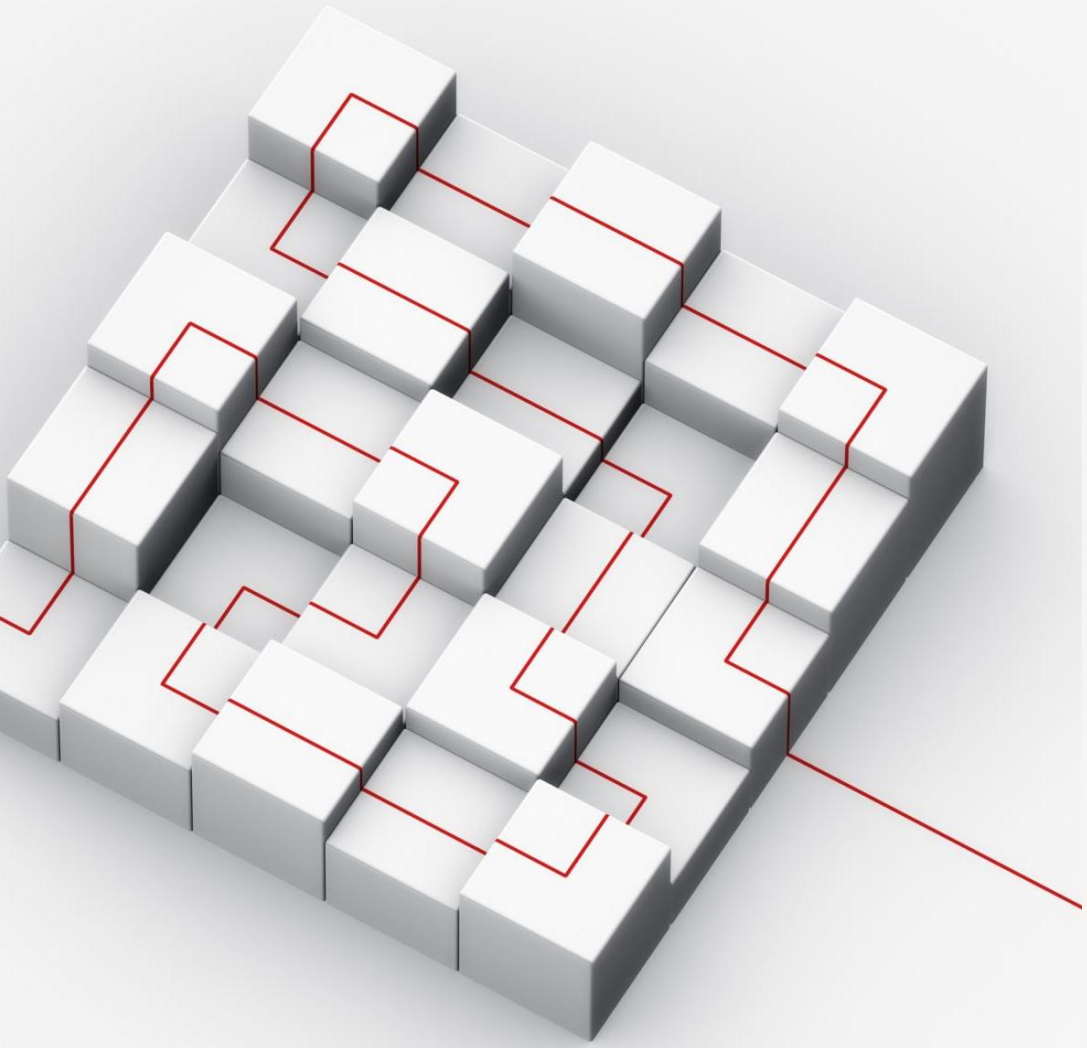

THE UNSEXY BITS OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT...
which, inconveniently, are often the most important bits.
ACADEMIC CALENDAR
CALENDAR JIGSAW (LEVEL: EXPERT)
EMAIL TETRIS
TIMETABLE TWEAKING
CHASING PEOPLE NICELY
GLAMOUR? NO THANKS. I'LL TAKE COHERENCE.
ALIGNING EVERYTHING WITH EVERYONE
POLICY TRANSLATION (NO ONE READS THE POLICY)
TODAY'S PLAN:
MEETING
MEETING
OTHER PEOPLE'S PRIORITIES
FIRE DRILL
REPEAT
+ SMILE
...
POWERED BY DEADLINES & COFFEE
CURRICULUM DEVELOPER (not a rockstar, but keeps the show on the road)
DOCUMENTING SO FUTURE YOU DOESN'T CRY
QUALITY CHECKING (IT'S A FEATURE, NOT A BUG)
HERDING ACADEMIC CATS
IT'S NOT JUST AN EMAIL...
MAKING IT WORK FOR STUDENTS (AND STAFF)
I TURN CHAOS INTO COHERENCE YOU'RE WELCOME
NOT SEXY.
VERY ESSENTIAL.
BORING TODAY, BETTER EDUCATION TOMORROW



Learning Outcomes

- To identify the key invisible processes that shape curriculum design,
- Evaluate the organisational and cultural mechanisms within programmes,
- Recognise how workflow redesign and collaborative practice drive curriculum coherence.
- Gain a practical model for conceptualising curriculum design as an ongoing, relational activity rather than a one time content generation exercise.
- To surface the forms of hidden labour
- To distinguish between the visible and invisible elements of curriculum work.

Theoretical Lens: Looking Beneath the Surface

This session draws on several complementary perspectives:

- Curriculum as an enacted, relational practice rather than a collection of documents (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006)
- Distributed leadership where responsibility is stretched across people, processes and systems (Spillane, 2006)
- Significant networks and the hidden "backstage" conversations through which educational change occurs (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009)
- Third-space work that sits between formal academic and professional service roles (Whitchurch, 2013)
- Invisible and care labour that sustains student and staff success but often goes unrecognised (Noddings, 2005)



Setting the Scene

- 2025-2026 design 3 programmes:
  - BA (hons) Education,
  - BA (hons) Early Years and Childhoods,
  - BA (hons) Special and Inclusive Education

- To stabilise programmes with fluctuating recruitment numbers
- Inc. foundation year rewrite – shared modules with another dept. for delivery
- To remove 15 credit modules
- To introduce shared modules across the three programmes
- To support graduate outcomes improvement



The what vs. the how

Each and every form I completed was concerned with the tangible aspects of programme design and delivery: inc. learning outcomes, assessment types and descriptions, module content, development of learning verbs etc.

In other words:

The What

The How

- Bring together 3 different programmes, each with different organisational, relational, and cultural ways of working. E.g.

    - Asking teams to work together on shared modules
    - Agreeing and standardising personal tutoring, references, meetings, moderations and attendance processes.

The **How** was never considered explicitly.

Nor was anyone allocated any time for consideration of this hidden culture work

Activity: What is visible?

- Have a think and pop in the chat what you consider to be all of the visible parts of a programme.



What is a programme?

- The overall, coherent course of study that leads to the award of a qualification, such as a degree, diploma, or certificate.
- A collection of:
  - modules,
  - learning experiences,
  - assessments,
  - support structures

that are deliberately designed to help students achieve a set of programme-level learning outcomes.

More than the sum total of its modules.

An organic system, where certain parts are visible to student and staff and other parts are invisible.

- Let's go deeper….



The Backstage of Curriculum Design

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) argue that many of the most important educational conversations occur "backstage“

- **Front Stage**: Validation documents; Module specifications; Programme handbooks; Assessment maps;
- **Back Stage;** Relationship building; Informal influence; Negotiation; Problem solving; Trust development

Curriculum quality emerges not only through formal curriculum artefacts, but through the often invisible networks and conversations that support them.



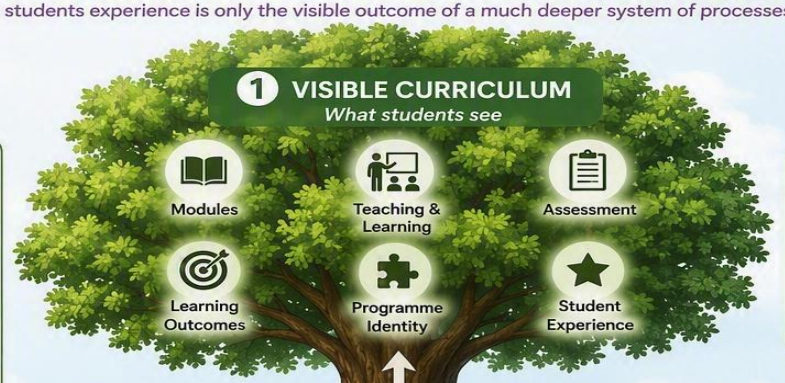
My model proposes a conceptual distinction between visible curriculum, invisible programme architecture and hidden labour, extending Roxå and Mårtensson's notion of backstage activity

- **Visible Curriculum**
- **Invisible Programme Architecture**
- **Hidden Labour.**

This model reconceptualises and differentiates phenomena that were previously grouped together.

BEYOND MODULES:
THE HIDDEN FOUNDATIONS OF PROGRAMME SUCCESS

What students experience is only the visible outcome of a much deeper system of processes and labour.



1 VISIBLE CURRICULUM
What students see

Visible Curriculum

- Modules
- Teaching & Learning
- Assessment
- Learning Outcomes
- Programme Identity
- Student Experience

The visible programme is often understood as the modules and learning activities students encounter.

2 INVISIBLE PROGRAMME ARCHITECTURE
The systems and processes that enable delivery

Invisible Programme Architecture

- Curriculum Mapping
- Assessment Boards
- Timetabling
- Quality Assurance
- Programme Monitoring
- External Examiners
- Regulatory Compliance
- Recruitment & Admissions
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Professional Accreditation
- Annual Review Processes
- Resource Planning

These structures coordinate and standardise the programme, transforming individual modules into a coherent student experience.

3 HIDDEN LABOUR
The work that keeps the architecture alive

Hidden Labour

ORGANISATIONAL WORK
- Chasing information
- Coordinating activities
- Managing dependencies
- Troubleshooting issues
- Scheduling and organising
- Translating policy into practice

RELATIONAL WORK
- Building trust
- Influencing colleagues
- Negotiating compromises
- Resolving tensions
- Securing buy-in
- Maintaining partnerships

CULTURAL WORK
- Creating shared purpose
- Sustaining programme identity
- Sense-making
- Embedding values
- Supporting belonging
- Emotional labour

Much of this work is informal, time-consuming, and rarely visible in workload models or performance measures, yet it is essential for programme success.

THE JOURNEY FROM HIDDEN TO VISIBLE

Hidden labour enables the programme architecture. → The programme architecture enables the curriculum. → The curriculum shapes the student experience. → Successful students and meaningful outcomes.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Programme success depends on more than module design
- Effective programmes require robust organisational systems
- Those systems are sustained through hidden labour
- Much of this labour is invisible, gendered, time-consuming and difficult to evidence
- Ignoring hidden labour risks undervaluing the work that makes successful programmes possible

Activity: Invisible Process

Visible curriculum feature	Invisible process underneath
Assessment schedule	
Student support activities	
Attendance expectations	
Assessment design	
Inclusive curriculum	
Programme coherence	

Activity: Possible Answers

Visible curriculum feature	Invisible process underneath
Assessment schedule	Academic calendar, room bookings, validation requirements, negotiation across modules
Student support activities	Tutorial systems, referral pathways, staff relationships, workload allocation
Attendance expectations	Monitoring systems, institutional policies, assumptions about engagement
Assessment design	Quality regulations, disciplinary norms, staff negotiations, external examiner expectations
Inclusive curriculum	Cultural values, hidden assumptions, advocacy work, relationship-building
Programme coherence	Countless coordination meetings, informal conversations, compromise and negotiation

Activity: Even Deeper.....



Visible curriculum feature	Invisible process underneath	Hidden labour required
Assessment	Academic calendar, room bookings, validation requirements, negotiation across modules	Chasing module leaders for dates; resolving timetable clashes; negotiating deadlines to avoid assessment bunching; persuading colleagues to adjust plans; repeatedly revising schedules in response to changes; communicating updates to staff and students.
Student support activities	Tutorial systems, referral pathways, staff relationships, workload allocation	
Attendance expectations	Monitoring systems, institutional policies, assumptions about engagement	
Assessment design	Quality regulations, disciplinary norms, staff negotiations, external examiner expectations	
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Student support activities	Tutorial systems, referral pathways, staff relationships, workload allocation	Building trust with students; noticing early signs of difficulty; following up non-attendance; coordinating support across services; having difficult wellbeing conversations; advocating for students; maintaining networks of contacts who can help.
Attendance expectations	Monitoring systems, institutional policies, assumptions about engagement	Contacting absent students; interpreting attendance data; deciding when intervention is needed; managing sensitive conversations; balancing support with compliance requirements; documenting actions and following up repeatedly.
Assessment design	Quality regulations, disciplinary norms, staff negotiations, external examiner expectations	Researching appropriate assessment methods; negotiating standards across teaching teams; drafting and redrafting briefs; incorporating feedback from colleagues and external examiners; mediating disagreements about academic expectations; ensuring alignment across modules.
Inclusive curriculum	Cultural values, hidden assumptions, advocacy work, relationship-building	Auditing materials for representation; seeking diverse perspectives and sources; challenging established practices; persuading colleagues of the need for change; consulting students; building partnerships with external contributors; managing resistance sensitively.
Programme coherence	Countless coordination meetings, informal conversations, compromise and negotiation	Building consensus across module teams; resolving territorial disputes; sharing information across boundaries; maintaining relationships; mentoring new colleagues; connecting disparate curriculum elements; remembering institutional history and previous decisions that shape current practice.

Curriculum re/design: Ongoing & Relational

- Curriculum re/design is not a one time content generation exercise, but an ongoing, relational activity carried out by the team (Spillane, 2006)
- Just as a tree must continually adapt so must programmes, they are not static artefacts.



The organisational/relational/cultural link

- Programme cultures does not emerge by accident. It is produced through everyday practices, interactions and decisions.
- Processes are not separate from culture. They are one of the main ways culture is enacted, reproduced and sustained.
- Behind these processes sits a layer of often unrecognised organisational, relational and cultural labour: coordinating, negotiating, translating, mentoring, sense-making and relationship-building.
- Together, these processes and forms of labour constitute the programme's "hidden architecture" which makes visible curriculum outcomes possible (Lea & Street, 1998; Trowler, 2008; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009)

Workflow Redesign Ideas

🌳 **Organisational Processes:** September • November • January • April • June

- Reviews systems, structures and workflows before and after major operational pinch points.

E.g., Assessment processes Timetabling Quality assurance procedures Communication systems Resource allocation

🤝 **Relational Practices**: October • February • May

- Reviews how people work together.

E.g. Programme team collaboration Student-staff partnership Professional service relationships Cross-module coordination Leadership practices

🌱 **Cultural Norms**: December • March • July

- Reviews values, assumptions and invisible expectations.

E.g. Invisible labour Collegiality Inclusion and belonging Programme identity Citizenship expectations



Workflow Redesign Model

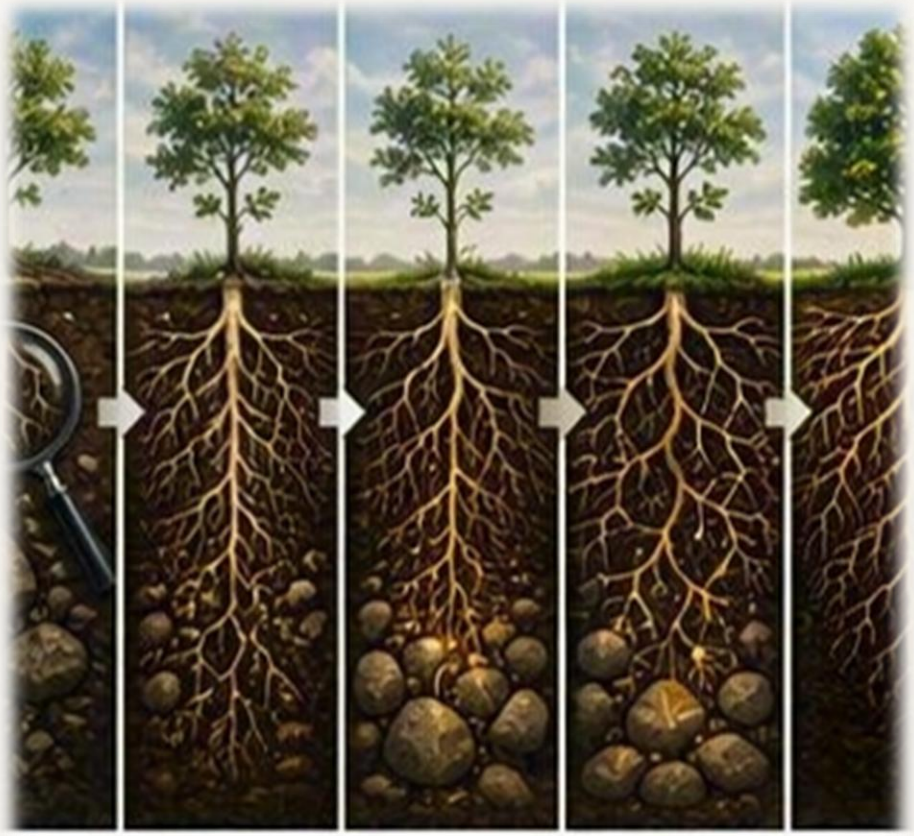
Stage	Key Question	Tree Metaphor
Trace	How does the work currently flow? Who is doing the work?	Exposing the roots
Reveal	What/who's hidden labour sustains it?	Identifying root hairs
Eliminate	What causes friction? What are the barriers	Removing rocks
Enable	How do we support collaboration?	Strengthening root networks
Monitor	Is the tree now healthier?	Checking growth

How do we know if roots are healthy?

Organisational Processes
- Assessment bunching reduced
- Fewer timetable conflicts
- Faster programme decision-making
- Fewer process bottlenecks
- Clear ownership of tasks

Relational Practices
- Increased cross-module collaboration
- More equitable distribution of work
- Stronger programme team participation
- Improved partnerships with professional services
- Better induction of new staff

Cultural Norms
- Invisible labour openly discussed
- Greater sense of shared ownership
- Reduced dependence on "heroic" individuals
- Stronger programme identity
- Increased staff belonging and trust



Invisible Labour and Recognition

- Whitchurch (2013) describes much university work as occurring in a "third space" between traditional academic and professional roles.
- Noddings (2005) further argues that care, relationships and support are fundamental educational activities.
- Woods, Malone & Hammond (under review) argue that in contemporary HE spaces where knowledge/information is pervasive and readily available, the relational aspect becomes more important for nourishing both students and staff and asks the question 'What does it mean to be human in the modern university?'



- Many examples discussed today sit within these spaces
  - :personal tutoring
  - placement coordination
  - student support
  - partnership building
  - curriculum coordination
  - mentoring colleagues

These activities are: essential time consuming relational difficult to measure often absent from formal workload and reward systems

Why is this model important?

- This reconceptualised and differentiated three-tier model which explicitly exposes hidden labour is important for quality of programmes for students, student experiences and also student outcomes.
- However, in a contemporary HE setting it is also important for staff.
    - Staff wellbeing
    - Staff workloads
    - Staff promotional pathways

    .

When the organisational, relational and cultural labour that sustains programme quality remains hidden, the contributions of those undertaking that work can also remain insufficiently recognised within workload, promotion and reward structures.



Hidden Architecture Will Matter More....

- Since the 1980s, English higher education has been reshaped by marketisation, competition and accountability regimes, increasingly positioning students as consumers and universities as competitors in a quasi-market (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2010).
- The expansion of tuition fees from 1998 onwards strengthened expectations that universities demonstrate value through measurable outcomes, performance indicators and student-facing metrics.
- Alongside this, managerial governance structures, performance management and audit cultures have increasingly prioritised measurable evidence of success and accountability (Shore & Wright, 2024).
- Frameworks such as the REF and TEF have reinforced the importance of visible indicators, outputs and performance measures in institutional decision-making.
- Consequently, universities have become highly effective at measuring curriculum outcomes (NSS, continuation, attainment, graduate outcomes) and curriculum artefacts (module specifications, assessment maps, validation documentation).



But we know....

- Activities that actually produce successful programmes are often:
    - relational, collaborative,
    - highly time-consuming, largely invisible within institutional systems,
    - poorly reflected in workload models,
    - difficult to quantify or evidence.
- Curriculum quality is shaped through collaboration, negotiation, relationship-building, leadership, policy translation, disciplinary deliberation, professional judgement and collective programme team decision-making.
- Institutions therefore often know what programmes achieve but have far less visibility of how programme teams create those achievements.

Education-focused academic pathways

- This challenge is:
  - as universities continue to expand education-focused, teaching-only and teaching-and-learning academic pathways
  - promotion routes within these pathways often remain less established than research pathways,
  - expectations around scholarship, leadership and impact can be less clearly defined.

- There is a risk that academics undertaking substantial curriculum leadership work may:
  - struggle to evidence their contribution where impact is distributed across teams and embedded within ongoing relational processes rather than visible outputs.
  - Equity implications because teaching, service, pastoral and relational labour is frequently undertaken disproportionately by women and part-time staff,
  - Most important contributors to curriculum quality remain systematically under-recognised.

Making the Roots Visible

- Successful programmes do not emerge solely from module content, assessments, or documentation.
- They are sustained by the organisational processes, relational practices, and cultural norms that sit beneath the surface.
- This work is ongoing and relational and often invisible yet essential.
- The quality of student outcomes depends not only on what we design, but on how programme teams work together to enact, maintain, and continually adapt that design.
- The quality of the academic lives and promotional opportunities also hinge on ensuring that this ongoing and relational and often invisible work is surfaced, recognised, shared and rewarded.
- As universities become increasingly metric-driven, the hidden architecture of programme leadership becomes simultaneously more important and less visible.

Questions



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