1. Introduction to the project

The Accessible Curriculum project was one of a number of College Improvement Projects set up early in 2014 within the College of Arts, Humanities and Law, sponsored by Professor Mark Peel and Dr. Ross Parry. The project was led by Katy Bunning from the School of Museum Studies. The project team included individuals from History, Museum Studies, the AccessAbility Centre and the Mental Wellbeing Service, as well as the Leicester Learning Institute (LLI) and the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU).

In June 2014, we were awarded funds from the Teaching Enhancement Fund, which enabled us to undertake extensive student consultation, and design a set of new resources to support the sharing of expertise and development of good practice in the area to support academics and course designers across our University.

Our project sought to review current existing policies, processes, expertise, and guidance at the University of Leicester around curriculum design, and to review other HEI’s approaches to embedding accessibility into curriculum design processes. We sought students’ visions for how they felt the University could teach and assess them in ways that were supportive of, and anticipated, their diverse preferences and needs. We inputted into curriculum design meetings and activities that were taking place in History and in the School of Museum Studies to act as testing grounds for our ideas, and to provide case studies of good practice in embedding accessibility into curriculum design at the earliest stages.

During our project, we developed our own definition of an ‘accessible curriculum’:

A curriculum that anticipates diverse preferences, needs, and abilities among student cohorts and provides in-built flexibility and anticipatory adjustments to accommodate this diversity at course design stages.

Through our research into both UK HEI and University of Leicester contexts, the team identified and refined a set of key principles, which underpin our definition:

1. Accessibility is a marker of quality in a curriculum.

2. An accessible curriculum has the objective of meeting legislative and QAA requirements.
3. An accessible curriculum contributes to equality, inclusion, participation, engagement, outcomes, support, health, wellbeing, and satisfaction among students.

4. Accessibility is a design issue. At the University of Leicester, it is relevant to all individuals and processes associated with curriculum design, teaching and assessment, as well as student support.

5. An accessible curriculum uses formats, processes and language which anticipate the need for choice, flexibility and reasonable adjustments in teaching and assessment. Working in this way should not be at the expense of meeting core intended learning outcomes or subject benchmarks.

6. An accessible curriculum is one which takes into account the range of protected characteristics, as well as language, cultural and social backgrounds, learning styles, and long-term and temporary issues among students who study with us.

7. An accessible curriculum is mindful of pace to avoid excessive workload and intensity across the curriculum and its delivery.

8. An accessible curriculum enables a degree of choice in how students are taught and assessed wherever possible, that is balanced with the need for structure.

9. An accessible curriculum is one which provides advance information to students about how they will be taught, what types of activities they will need to undertake, and how and why they will be assessed.

10. An accessible curriculum should be supported by an accessible infrastructure of student support, services, and interfaces across the University.

11. There will always be a need for 'ad hoc' reasonable adjustments for students with particular needs.

12. An accessible curriculum anticipates and expects diverse needs, abilities, and preferences among its teachers and assessors as well as its students.
2. Key findings and recommendations

The current University Teaching and Learning Strategy 2011-2016 and the Learning and Teaching Mission Statement were not found to highlight the principles of accessibility and inclusivity in curriculum design in a sufficiently clear or detailed way.

**Recommendation 1 – Short to medium term**: Our new Teaching and Learning Strategy should clearly highlight our commitment to designing and delivering accessible curricula.

Within existing curriculum design documentation, the need for accessible curricula is addressed either as concerned with ‘flexibility’ (see Code of Practice for the Development, Approval and Modification of Taught Provision) or relating to ‘students with specific learning difficulties and disabilities’ who may require adjustments (see Programme Development and Approval form). Neither of these was found to be entirely satisfactory to our broad understanding of an accessible curriculum. We did not find a sufficiently nuanced understanding across all documents which goes beyond flexibility (to include pace, clarity of information, and teaching materials for example), as well as including those without identified disabilities.

Within the Programme Development and Approval form, programme specifications and module specifications form templates, there is insufficient linking of issues of accessibility with assessment design.

**Recommendation 2 – Short to medium term**: Existing curriculum design documents and processes are updated to include formal guidance and scrutiny of course teaching methods, learning outcomes, and assessment design to ensure support for diverse student abilities, needs, and preferences.

**Recommendation 3 – Short to medium term**: Panels for programme approval should routinely include an individual who can address matters of accessibility in curriculum design. In the short term, use should be made of an advisory team within or alongside such panels, drawing on expertise in the LLI and AccessAbility Centre.

There was little found during a University-wide review of visible supportive resources to show what being ‘accessible’ and ‘flexible’ means and how it can be achieved at either programme or module design level through to the point of delivery of the teaching. For example, there are no dedicated pages on our University website that specifically focus on embedding ‘accessibility’ within curriculum design.

Responses to the question on ‘accessibility’ in the Programme Development and Approval forms suggest limited understanding of what accessibility means at design stage for academics designing courses in our University.
**Recommendation 4 – Short to medium term:** The creation of specific guidance and a checklist for staff involved in curriculum design and change processes should be produced, to facilitate the creation of accessible curricula. As part of our TEF project and funding, individuals involved in the Accessible Curriculum Improvement Project are ready to lead on the creation and delivery of such guidance during June and July 2015.

There are no mechanisms to capture how accessibility is embedded beyond initial programme approval to subsequent stages of curriculum design, including curriculum change and updating, the design of modules, and the design and evaluation of teaching and assessment.

**Recommendation 5 – Short to medium term:** Programme and module specification forms and curriculum change summary forms should be redesigned to capture approaches to accessibility in curriculum design.

**Recommendation 6 - Short to medium term:** The External Examiner report template, and Module feedback forms should be redesigned to support reflection and evaluation of curricula in terms of accessibility, in terms of both course design and course delivery.

Student consultations revealed several key issues around accessibility in their experience of teaching and learning at Leicester. These included: the absence of advance information on the structure of sessions (preventing familiarisation and downloading of the session structure in advance); the uneven use of lecture capture (with this unevenness found to be particularly unhelpful for nearly all students consulted); and the use of ‘unseen exams’ (which were widely unpopular among those we consulted).

Powerpoint slides were seen by the students to be extremely important to their learning both before and after sessions.

Overall students welcomed the chance to be involved in curriculum design.

**Recommendation 7 – Short term:** The University should develop a code of practice on teaching and learning that requires lecture notes, slides, or other course materials to be made available to students in advance (ideally at least 24 hours) of sessions.

**Recommendation 8 – Short term:** The University adopts routine use of lecture capture across all courses where this would be appropriate.

**Recommendation 9 – Longer term:** The University should consider accessibility as extending to issues around intensity of workload and pace of programme caused by administrative need, as well as curriculum design.
An accessible curriculum is a design issue but also an issue of delivery (of study guides, teaching content, and assessment etc.) and student experience. We cannot be certain that a curriculum that has been designed with accessibility in mind is in fact accessible at the point of delivery. Commitment to accessibility at the point of delivery is vital.

**Recommendation 10 – Medium to longer term:** A further College-wide project is undertaken to continue to support our case study courses and modules as they are delivered in 2015/6 to students in order to measure the impact of accessible design on staff, mitigating circumstances, withdrawals, uptake of AccessAbility Centre/Mental Wellbeing support, requests for adjustments, and student evaluation.

### 3. Impact

It has been suggested that course design and teaching that is more mindful of accessibility and inclusivity can sometimes take more time to develop, particularly in the initial stages of its adoption (Waterfield and West 2010). Based on research undertaken at other HEIs (Ibid.), we expect that embedding accessibility as a core and visible aspect of our provision at Leicester will have the following potentially measurable impacts on our time, including:

- Fewer cases of ‘mitigating circumstances’ for both long and short term issues
- Enhanced student engagement and less demand for additional support from tutors
- Fewer failed assignments
- Fewer appeals
- Less need for extensive provision of note taking support
- Less demand for alternative arrangements and ‘ad hoc’ adjustments
- Fewer student complaints and greater levels of student satisfaction overall

Our University currently has a unique opportunity to embed a highly sophisticated and nuanced approach to accessibility through all processes and resources around teaching and learning and curriculum change. University-wide and CAHL initiatives through 2015-16 and 2016-17, involving the harmonisation of module size, changes to the academic year, the creation of majors and minors, and the harmonisation of assessment size, should reflect a deep commitment to accessibility from the outset.

Embedding the principles of an accessible curriculum at Leicester would position us in line with those HEIs who are at the forefront of accessible provision. Crucially, it would also directly address changing QAA expectations and reductions in disabled students’ funding in the UK.
The Accessible Curriculum team

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References
