

Stage 1 Analysis and Planning Report 21st Century Curriculum Project

Executive summary

Project Context: The 21st Century Curriculum (21CC) Project is one element of the University's response to three significant challenges:

1. a more competitive higher education market in which the Western Sydney Brand is not yet a challenger to more prestigious NSW universities that are perceived to offer prospective students a higher value educational proposition;
2. a disrupted future of work that offers graduates new opportunities, and demands that universities equip our students with new knowledge and abilities for their future success; and
3. the University's commitment to anchor the growing cities of Western Sydney to ensure the social benefits of projected economic growth address the significant social disadvantage in the region.

The University Executive endorsed the 21CC project brief in March 2017 (See <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/21c>). The project provides an opportunity for the University community to co-create our future curriculum and encompasses **four strands** of synergistic work:

1. Protect and enhance our established core educational degree offerings.
2. Complement those core offerings with new future-facing degrees and new curriculum elements.
3. Reduce our reliance on those core offerings with new alternative curriculum credentials.
4. Build institutional capacity to future proof curriculum renewal.

The first stage of the Project (March – June 2017) focussed on **Analysis and Planning** to lay the foundations for future initiatives in the three-year project and commenced work on the first strand - to **protect and enhance our established core educational offerings**.

The Course and Load Planning Group developed an 'Index for Course Performance' to support review and management of our future Course Profile. The project team consulted with the university community to identify available institutional capacities to leverage to deliver a distinctive curriculum.

To build the rationale and evidence base for this first stage of the project activities, a Stage 1 Working Party of key university experts was established to analyse available evidence on current curriculum structures. This included:

- Current course records, approvals and enrolment data (Course Data Management team & Chair Senate)
- Current curriculum mapping and Course structures (Office of Quality and Planning);
- Financial viability (Finance Office).
- Prospective student market research (Student Experience Office, Marketing).
- Competitor course structure benchmarking and higher education curriculum research (Learning Futures Portfolio).

The key findings of the working party were:

- Our current degrees reflect a proliferation of over 401 courses listed in the handbook with different rules around majors, key programs and multiple versions of similar degrees.

- The idiosyncratic nature of our degree structures makes the work of innovating at scale difficult and limits opportunities for student mobility and exchange between degrees.
- Currently our course profile includes differently named degrees that are, educationally potentially indistinguishable to students.
- Current descriptions of curricula in non-professionally accredited degrees do not consistently communicate the range of potential employment destinations to students.
- The intention of offering students the opportunity to study outside their core disciplines as part of their degree, through choosing 80 credit points of free electives, is being realised in less than 20% of our degrees.
- Prospective students making decisions about universities and courses are confused by the multiplicity of options and are also concerned about the inability to change if they find a course is not what they wanted.
- Current course structures do not align with the more 'thematic' course decision making process of many prospective students.
- Current undergraduate degree structures are often complex and confusing both for potential students and for continuing students and staff in other Schools.
- New courses introduced to attract students have often been over-optimistic in their load forecasts, and have been ad hoc additions rather than planned as part of a coherent institutional course profile strategy.
- Our competitor Universities present explicit institutional signature pedagogies that convey educational 'value' and explicitly realise this value in visible curriculum structures.

The key findings are summarised in the following sections and additional information is provided in the appendices:

- Current curriculum structures
- Successful Curriculum structures at other universities
- Partnerships: Our distinctive Institutional Strength
- Prospective students' curriculum aspirations

The 21CC project seeks to make the University more efficient with a simpler curriculum architecture, but also more competitive. The first strand of the project has two elements: (i) the development of simpler shared architectures for our degrees to capitalise on synergies between degrees enabling agile innovation at scale, and improving 'visibility' to students; (ii) the reinvigoration of our existing degrees under those shared architectures, through the inclusion of new signature learning experiences and opportunities to enhance our students' career success.

To protect and enhance our existing offerings we will embed these distinctive 'signature' learning opportunities across the new simplified curriculum architecture of our degrees. Those curriculum and co-curriculum signature experiences will be designed to deliver a distinctive competitive edge to our graduates in the future world of work and society. They will leverage our unique Partnerships and Pathways (see Project Brief) to build both aspiration and participation. We will also seek to better align our simplified curriculum architectures with the ways we understand students make decisions about their study-to-career pathways.

The next step in the 21CC project is a series of School-based Curriculum Pilots, building on School specific evidence of the type compiled in this report, to review and where necessary simplify existing curriculum structures and develop strategies to embed signature learning experiences that build the relevance and value proposition of our current degrees. Information on the School Pilots is available on the 21CC website. The School pilots and other university wide 21CC initiatives this year also lay the foundation for the work of creating new degrees and alternative offerings which is the focus of the next stage of the 21CC project.

For more information about the 21CC project please visit the Project website or contact the Project team.

1. Background

This document is a report from the Stage 1 Working Group of the University's 21st Century Curriculum (21CC) Project. The document brings together the range of currently available information about our courses and curriculum in a way which supports the ambitions of the first stage of the 21CC project, in particular, the desire to develop a simpler and more coherent set of degree curriculum architectures.

The 21st Century Curriculum Project seeks to make the University more efficient with a simpler curriculum architecture, but also more competitive. As well as providing greater efficiency, a simpler set of shared curriculum structures will ensure our offerings are more transparent and accessible to students. Both are necessary if we are to innovate at scale and implement agile and proactive curriculum renewal. With more attractive, accessible course offerings we can increase market share and build student load and revenue.

Current market research on how students choose universities and courses is indicating that many are overwhelmed by the range of choice and are anxious about what will happen if they choose badly. This Stage 1 report on curriculum renewal focuses on what we know about current Western Sydney University curriculum structures. From this there are some key messages on how curriculum structures may be affecting both the experience of current students and the perceptions of prospective students. Through the School Pilots, Schools will be supported to apply relevant school data sets (qualitative and quantitative) identified in this report to support curriculum renewal.

2. Current curriculum structures

Free electives

Our current curriculum structure nominally has a 160-point key program for a Bachelor degree, with an 80-credit point elective structure (totally 240 credit points). Students can also choose from (80 point) majors and (40 point) sub-majors, to add specialisation and/or cross-discipline study. However, over the years since 2001, this has evolved into a much more complex and varied picture. Elective options are limited and the number of variations and pathways has proliferated, often driven by marketing considerations.

There is less cross-discipline choice than intended with the elective structure. We also lack capacity to let students know what elective options are available. Specifically:

- 29% of the Bachelor courses have no electives and many more have fewer than the recommended 80 credit points.
- While professionally accredited courses tend to have fewer electives, there are some non-accredited courses with no electives.
- Majors and sub-majors, selection from pools of approved units or 'recommended electives' also constrain elective options.
- There is no central database of elective options for students to refer to. Nor is there a web-based tool to support students' selection of courses and units.

Coherence and distinctiveness

There are over 400 courses listed in the current handbook, not counting those that are planned or suspended. As well as the standard Bachelor and Masters degrees, the courses database includes assorted pathway, sub-degree, diploma and graduate certificate levels offered as nested options within a discipline, with some offered only as 'exit' options. Table 1 lists the types of qualification offered. Appendix 1 has more detail.

Some disciplines have many pathways/variants, not counting double degrees and others have only one qualification. There are also wide variations between Schools in how a 'course' is defined. Whereas Science

has specialisations as separate degree courses, Business and Arts have these as variations (majors and sub-majors) within one course.

Undergraduate qualifications	Postgraduate qualifications
Diploma	Qualifying
Diploma Extended	Graduate Certificate
Diploma full time	Graduate Diploma
Associate Degree	Masters
First Year Program (FYP)	Advanced/Executive
FYP Fast	Exit only
FYP Extended	Double degrees
	Masters/research degrees (HDR preparation)

Table 1. Varying types of qualification available within different discipline streams

Particular named degree courses have been created to attract students. However, a review of the new courses introduced over the last three years shows that two-thirds have not yet met their target for student load (see Appendix 1). Each point in Figure 1 represents the enrolments for a course in 2017, showing a majority of low-enrolment courses.

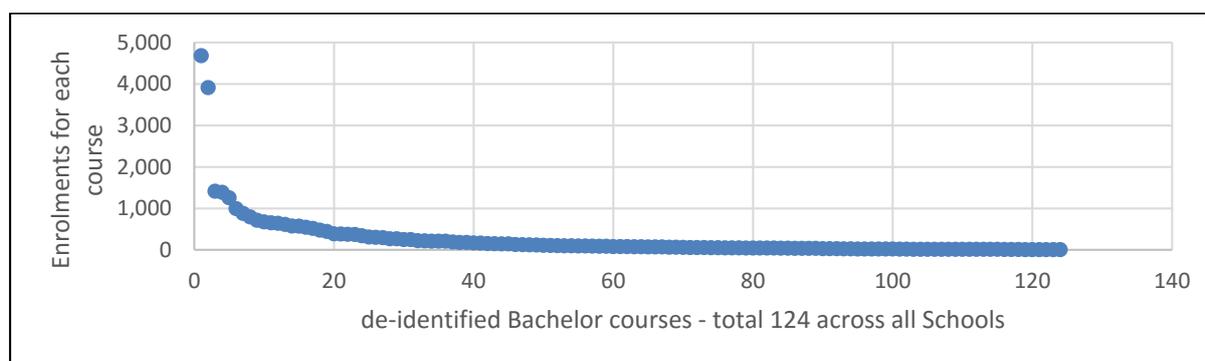


Figure 1. Plot of 2017 enrolments for 124 Bachelor courses

The Course Load and Planning Group (CLPG) is conducting a review of our current course profile and developing a data-driven Index for Course Performance. The Stage 1 Working Party reviewed course financial data provided by the Finance Office and while noting the importance of this information recognised that this would be integrated in the Index for Course Performance. The group concluded there was no consistent relationship apparent between curriculum structure and profitability. The work of the CLPG in developing the Index for Course Performance to support the ongoing management of a more coherent degree profile for the University will directly support and complement the first stage of the 21CC project and the School Pilots.

The 21CC Stage 1 Working Party focused on how the curriculum structures may be influencing student recruitment, and on the data available to inform curriculum renewal. The [Curriculum Mapping Tool](#) (CMT) was developed by the University and made available as a web based tool in 2017 to provide consistent data on the content of units of study and their relationship to degree outcomes. This tool is now being rolled out across the University with support for Schools in data entry to the new tool provided by the 21CC project and support for School staff in using the tool provided by Curriculum Advisors and Course Quality Officers.

A new [Course Profiling Tool](#) (CPT) was developed by the Office of Quality and Performance to support Schools in reviewing their current curriculum structures. This tool provides a visual mapping of the contributions of shared unit sets to different degrees indicating the overlap and redundancy in the unit sets. Support for Schools in using this tool is provided by the Course Quality Officers. The Stage 1 Working

Party analysis shows that several courses have nearly all of the available constituent study units in common with other courses. In these cases, the distinctiveness of the degree is hard to validate. Appendix 1 contains some examples.

In some courses, students can select multiple majors, potentially watering down the value of the major as evidence of specialisation. While there are rules about points for majors and sub-majors, there is no coherent plan and many exceptions are reported. Large pools of units as restricted options (as distinct from free electives) within courses make it confusing for students to choose appropriately. While there may be good reasons why, for example, 45 of the 194 BA pool units have not been offered in the last three years the confusion in choice is exacerbated when many of the units listed are not on offer.

Curriculum changes with unclear transition information makes it difficult for continuing students to know what they need to enrol in. The proportion of 'continuing' courses shows some of the legacy problems created by previous curriculum change. More systematic mapping of old units into new courses using the Curriculum Mapping Tool, will enable provision of advice for students on equivalent old and new units. This would enable them to transfer to new courses and reduce the need for many of the low-enrolment continuing courses.

Flexibility and specialisation

In many of our Bachelor programs, students could delay a choice about specialisation until the 2nd year of study. This suits those students who begin their degree uncertain of their interests and strengths. These options could be more clearly articulated to students.

Many undergraduate courses have major options that allow students to change their original choice at the end of first year and often up until middle of 2nd year. It is easier for students to change specialisation when the specialisations are within one course. If they are in a separate course, a student who wants to shift the focus of their study has to transfer between courses, creating additional administrative steps for staff as well as the student.

While some courses have many study units in common with other courses, there are also specialist professional courses with practice-based units that are unique to one course. A review using the CMT enables Schools to identify where the course-specific units are justified by specific professional learning requirements and where units that have similar learning outcomes might be combined.

For non-accredited degrees, including those with multiple options for specialisation within them, there is scope for more consistently linking course options to related employment opportunities. Some of the handbook entries on career opportunities give specific examples of the kind of work graduates could do and the skills required. Others give only general lists of broad industry or professional contexts. Appendix 1 gives some illustrative examples.

Key messages about the current curriculum structures

1. The underlying concept of our bachelor courses is simple, but complexity has developed, some of which has been marketing-driven.
2. The current course profile reflects a sustained effort by Schools to build student load, especially in the absence of a coherent plan for an overall academic profile at the University level.
3. Specialist degrees can attract students who are clear about their career choices. However, some specialist degrees may simply be repackaged versions what is already available in broader degrees. Even in broader degrees, students could benefit from explicit identification of the careers and skills associated with each degree option.
4. We have not made the most of the original intention to allow cross-disciplinary choice through free electives. The perception of choice is not being realised in practice.

5. Professional accreditation requirements shape many of our courses, and restrict the elective choices, in ways that may not always be justified by accreditation requirements.
6. The presentation of options and pathways is confusingly complex, for potential and current students.
7. To make it easier to innovate at scale across, we need to reduce the number of courses and make the structure of courses simpler and more coherent across the University

3. Successful curriculum structures at other universities

A benchmarking review of the curriculum and course information available from our competitors noted some common features associated with successful curricula. The review included local NSW universities and also internationally some of the top-ranking universities under 50 years old. Many of our competitors have an explicit institutional signature pedagogy, alongside a statement about how these translate into the curriculum. There are common signature curriculum elements: e.g., core program/year, compulsory university-wide units focused on achieving graduate attributes (holistic), interdisciplinary breadth or signature elements such as work-integrated learning, for example:

- Macquarie University – PACE as a distinguishing feature
- University of Sydney – Open Learning Environment (planned for 2018)
- City University Hong Kong – Gateway education requirement (multi-disciplinary experiences)

In many of these successful universities, there is explicit recognition that ‘real/authentic’ learning happens in contexts outside the university curriculum and context.

- UTS – Shopfront (link between university, students and community organisations)

The suite of degrees are often clustered into types to enable student choice/flexibility between course structures:

- University of Sydney – Liberal Arts & Sciences; Specialist; Professional

Most of the universities that are comparable to Western Sydney University (WSU) and that appear to be successful both locally and internationally, put an emphasis on the communication of their distinctive curriculum principles, pedagogies and structures to students and potential students. Maastricht University is known internationally for problem-based learning (and potential students can see this), and the UTS Model is aligned to the ways all its Faculties present their educational offerings to students. Further, a comparison of the course aims of three similar degrees (Arts, Computer Science, Business) across local NSW competitors reveals that there is a variety in emphasis: some focus on a description of the discipline’s knowledge base and its relation to contemporary problems, others focus on the structure and sequencing of units, and others include a focus on what students will be able to achieve, do, or create as a result of learning in their courses. Where there is a unique/showcase learning opportunity for students, these are also emphasised. Appendix 2 has more details.

Key messages about competitors

We should develop an institutional educational rationale across all our courses that:

- provides a coherent narrative about the University’s curriculum distinctiveness and opportunities for students;
- feeds into all our curriculum structures;
- identifies clusters of degree types with common characteristics; and
- focuses our effort on communicating our educational distinctiveness to prospective students, and what that distinctiveness can lead to in terms of students’ futures.

We should leverage our distinctive institutional strengths to develop signature curriculum elements (university-wide) that explicitly offer prospective students pathways to success in the future world of work, and which could be embedded into a simpler set of degree structures.

4. Partnerships: Our distinctive institutional strength

The 21CC project team worked with the university community to identify potential institutional capacities to deliver a distinctive curriculum. WSU has the potential to engage students in purposeful and meaningful experiential learning that promotes social cohesion, health, employment and economic prosperity. Our region is unique, as are the opportunities it provides for experiential learning. We are embedded in one of the most diverse multicultural populations in the world and in the third largest economy in Australia. Our neighbours include over 100 nationalities, more than 150 of Australia's top 500 companies and a pool of industries growing at much faster rates than the national average.

Community and industry partnerships are a significant dimension of the identity of WSU. Partnerships provide major benefits to campus, community and the GWS economy. Our current partnerships can be classified as:

1. GWS local community (& business) engagement (e.g. Aboriginal Elders, WSBC, Alumni)
2. Network partners (e.g. Sydney School of Entrepreneurship, SemiPermanent, RCE UN University)
3. Industry partners (e.g. WSU internship scheme, Jobs for the West)
4. Commercial provider partners (Adobe, Microsoft)
5. Edu-venture partners (e.g. OES, SIBT)
6. Research & innovation partners (e.g. Research themes, institutes/industry partnerships, Launchpad)

These partners have the potential to quickly become a basis for unique and significant learning experiences for not only our students but for everyone involved in such partnerships.

However, the messages the University communicates about partnerships are fragmented and are not yet having the broad impact needed for partnerships to be seen as a signature element of the WSU learning experiences. Current curriculum structures are further obscuring the role partnership elements play in providing a unique learning experience in our major degree programs.

These partners also embody the 'future of work' we aspire to prepare students for. If we successfully embed our unique partnerships in our curriculum, not only do we offer students a learning experience they will perceive has highly relevant to their career aspirations, we will ensure that our curriculum remains responsive to the rapidly changing world of work those partners represent. Our partnerships offer us a way to connect our curriculum with our students' and their families' aspirations, to influence their choice of university and to enhance their progression to successful careers.

Key messages about partnerships

- Our established partnerships with community and industry groups provide us a unique opportunity to create exceptional learning experiences for our students but these partnerships are under-utilised in the current curriculum structures, making it difficult for students to find and engage with the experiences that would benefit and broaden their career aspirations.
- There is scope to leverage and re-orient existing significant University partnership initiatives (such as Launch Pad & the Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development) to deliver 'at scale' signature learning experiences.
- There is no coordinated oversight or management of partnerships and no support for schools in deriving maximum educational impact from partnerships.

5. Prospective students' curriculum aspirations

Two recent market research studies commissioned by the University and carried out by The Behavioural Architects, and Strativity contain information about the kind of curriculum structures that might be attractive to prospective students. The findings relevant to curriculum structures are summarised below. Appendix 3 has more details.

The Behavioural Architects carried out an in-depth study of how students navigate choices about universities and courses. They found that students find the multiplicity of options confusing. School leavers with higher ATARs are particularly anxious about making the right choice. Those with lower ATARs are less worried and often do less research into options, but may then enrol in a course that doesn't suit them and will want to change after first year. Overall there is a preference for courses offering tangible job-related skills.

Strativity carried out separate research into the Western Sydney student experience and confirmed that students find course choice challenging at all stages. Initial enrolment and selection of courses and units is confusing. If they realise the course is not what they really wanted, they perceived that it is confusing and hard to change and they may well drop out rather than transfer to another option.

Key messages from market research

- Students find selecting from the multiplicity of options for universities and degree courses confusing and stressful.
- Some students are clear about what they want to learn and why. There is also a demand for professionally aligned courses perhaps (but not necessarily) offering less elective choice.
- Course structures that don't unnecessarily restrict students' options for changing study pathways would appeal to students, especially those who are less confident about their degree decisions.
- All course descriptions should clarify the tangible job-related skills offered.

6. Where to next?

In the next stage of the 21st Century Curriculum Project, the Stage 1 Working Group will support Schools with relevant data in relation to the key messages in this report to progress strategic curriculum renewal in each school. Figure 2 gives an overview of the core data available.

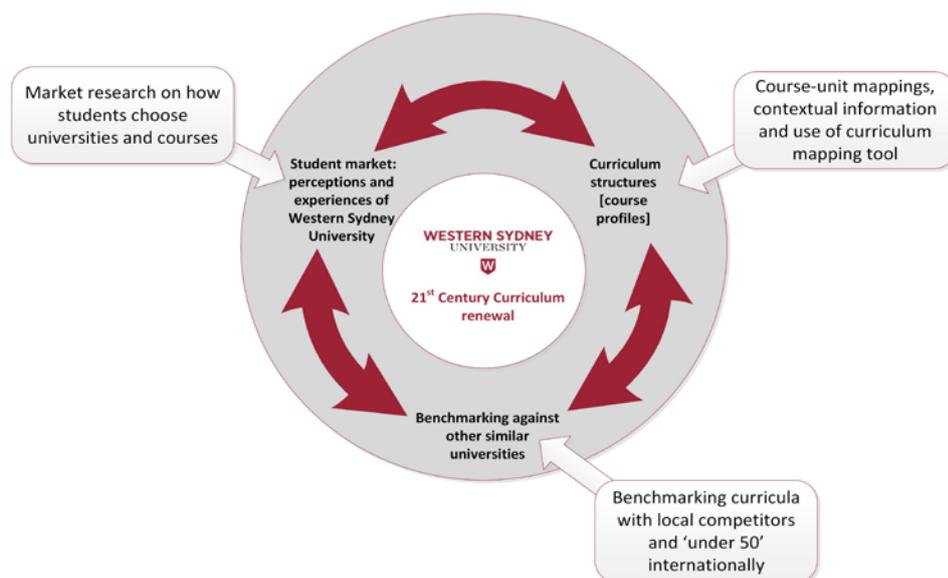


Figure 2. Western Sydney University Core Data

Project funding has been made available to support 6-month 'School pilot' projects to review and develop proposals for more coherent course structures and to identify and strengthen opportunities for embedding signature learning experiences through expanded and enhanced educational partnerships with community and industry. The pilots will also support Schools to fast-track renewal of strategically important load-bearing courses where relevant. The focus and outcomes of these Pilots will be negotiated with each School Dean. The 21CC project team and staff in the Learning Futures Portfolio will support and coordinate the pilots. School-based Curriculum Advisors and Course Quality Officers can assist with use of the Curriculum Mapping Tool and the Course Profiling Tool to review and analyse course structures. As the project is implemented over the next 3 years, there will be additional opportunities for engagement that takes account of the insights and trends from market research and future workforce needs.

For regular updates, and more information on other 21CC project initiatives and future funding opportunities visit the [21st Century Curriculum Project website](#).