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A New Curriculum for a Changing World

The University of Sydney's Ambitious Reimagining of the Undergraduate Experience Remains Rooted in Academic Rigor but Embraces Innovation

Young people graduating from university and embarking on their careers can now expect to change jobs as many as four times by their early thirties, according to recent analysis of work data by LinkedIn, the job-networking site. This is around twice as often as their immediate predecessors, in Generation X, and is more than many older workers would have experienced during their entire lives.

Universities are grappling with the implications of this shift in employment patterns, even as they try to come to terms with the evolving demands of employers and what these changes mean for how young people are educated. The very nature of work is in flux. Technological advances are transforming the workplace, and the skills and competencies that employers seek are becoming more fluid and difficult to categorize. Along with the job-specific hard skills that have always been prerequisites for entry into various professions, employers are increasingly requiring that workers demonstrate mastery of a broad range of soft skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving, oral and written communication abilities, digital literacy, and inventiveness.

For the University of Sydney, one of Australia's leading universities, this foment has served as a catalyst for rethinking the fundamentals of the institution's undergraduate curriculum. "We're thinking about emerging challenges in the world, the general discussion about the future of work, and the more dynamic careers our graduates now have," says Philippa Pattison, the university's deputy vice chancellor for education.



Shortly after her arrival in Sydney in 2014 from the University of Melbourne, another of Australia's top institutions, Ms. Pattison initiated a discussion to examine every aspect of the undergraduate curriculum, which informed the University's 2016-20 Strategic Plan. The process included outreach to students, faculty, and

employers, reviews of international trends and higher-education research, and input from experts on the changing nature of work. A common refrain from students was frustration that, although they valued their academic experience, they worried that their

personal development and eventual readiness for careers were not given enough attention. “There was a sense that we weren’t necessarily challenging students as much as we should be,” says Ms. Pattison.

The consultation process underscored shortcomings in traditional approaches to higher education as well as specific aspects of the University of Sydney undergraduate experience that could be enhanced. Fostering collaboration among students across disciplines as well as engaging more with employers emerged as priorities early on. “Most students work a lot of the time as individuals, and universities are actually quite siloed into different faculties and schools, even though a lot of the outside world is collaborative and involves work among different disciplines,” explains Richard Miles, a professor of history and archaeology and the university’s pro-vice-chancellor for education enterprise and engagement. More than ever, as work environments become more cross-disciplinary and integrated, universities must ensure that students are given opportunities to do collaborative work with partners from outside their fields of concentration, he says. “We shouldn’t just presume that students have that experience when they leave university.”

The consultation and discussion period took more than two years and culminated in a proposal to overhaul the existing undergraduate curriculum. The new Sydney Undergraduate Experience, which will go into effect next year, is anchored around four components, each rooted in the conviction that, as graduates leave university to begin their working lives, they must be equipped with a broad range of skills to help them navigate and succeed in an increasingly complex world.

The first component, academic depth and rigor in a primary field of study, is of course central to any top-flight university education and represents no departure from how the University of Sydney has long approached undergraduate education. The second component, to ensure that graduates possess the cultural competence to work collaboratively in diverse groups and across cultural boundaries, has been newly adopted as an essential part of the undergraduate experience. The university’s commitment to ensuring students’ cultural competence is reflected in its ambition for half of all undergraduates to engage in an overseas program or similarly intensive cross-cultural experience by 2020, more than double the current figures. The third component, cross-disciplinary learning, will be fostered both within the academic setting and with outside organizations. The fourth, the authentic application of expertise to real-world challenges, is being developed through collaboration with a wide range of partners, including companies, research organizations, and government.

These core components are underpinned by sweeping changes to the curriculum, including new four-year undergraduate degree programs that combine three-year bachelor degrees in arts, commerce, design computing, economics, science, and visual arts, with a new bachelor of advanced studies. Alongside the new four-year undergraduate curriculum, students will continue to have a three-year option. “We have left a lot of choice open,” says Ms. Pattison. Indeed, many Sydney students have already been pursuing paths of study that incorporate elements of the new curriculum. The crucial difference is that, beginning next



year, every undergraduate will be able to integrate each of the four anchor components into their course of study.

The previous selection of more than 120 undergraduate degree options will be streamlined to 50 single, combined, and dual degree programs, designed both for students who are certain of their career trajectory as well as those who are seeking more latitude to explore other fields as they progress toward graduation. A new Open Learning Environment consisting of short, modular courses will allow students to explore outside their own disciplines in areas as diverse as cultural

competence, social media, business entrepreneurship, managing and analysing data, health challenges, and global ethics.

Despite some initial wariness among students who worried that the envisioned changes were overly “careerist,” by the time the proposal for large-scale curriculum change went before the university’s academic board in late 2016, “there was no resistance to speak of,” says Ms. Pattison.

Victoria Zerbst, a fourth-year student majoring in philosophy with a concentration on ethics and aesthetics, was editing the student newspaper at the time and she shared some of the initial reservations. But she was also intrigued enough when she heard about the pilot programs for the new curriculum’s interdisciplinary projects that she applied to take part in a research project with the state parliament of New South Wales. She describes herself as a comedian and a writer and had little prior interest in public sector work. But she was drawn to the idea of working with students from different academic backgrounds on a project with real-world application and learning more about how government functions. “I thought, that’s cool! I love figuring out how things work, and accessing parts of the world I wouldn’t have access to otherwise,” she says.

She worked with four other students, one majoring in economics, another in design computing, a third in media and law, and a fourth in commerce and law. At the end of the semester, the group produced a 10,000-word brief about technology-facilitated abuse in the context of domestic violence. Despite her experience as a “creative collaborator,” Ms. Zerbst found that working on a research project with students from academic backgrounds so different from her own in philosophy gave her new insights into working with colleagues, she says.

Mark Jeyaraj is in his final year of studying for a bachelor of commerce degree in liberal studies, a program that is already designed to encompass four years. Like Ms. Zerbst, he doesn't envision a career in government, but he was interested in taking part in the pilot interdisciplinary project exploring the legal and social implications of how drones are being used by law enforcement authorities in New South Wales and other jurisdictions. He wanted to gain insights into how government functions and the perspective of lawmakers. "It was interesting to step out of my comfort zone," he says. He found it especially compelling to see how his teammates with a background in law approached things differently than he did, relying more on prior research and precedent while he focused on the economic and business perspectives. "I'm used to convincing someone through argument and commerce. It was very different," he says.

A steady flow of such experiences, in which students are exposed to different ways of thinking, collaborate with colleagues from unfamiliar fields of study, and are able to gain insight into the real-work application of the work they are doing are all fundamental to the new Sydney Undergraduate Experience. The transition to the new curriculum represents a shift in direction that will place the university at the forefront of institutions that are reconceiving how they teach and prepare students for their post-university lives. Embracing a new approach while at the same time sacrificing none of the disciplinary rigor upon which the university's reputation has been built is a daunting endeavour, acknowledges Richard Miles. "We will probably get some things wrong and we will learn as we go along," he says. "What this is fundamentally about is that our graduates leave university with the key attributes of being able to think critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, and have enough resilience so that when they face real problems, they can find ways of making things right."

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