## Keele Elective Pathways: Students as partners in a co-designed curriculum

Elliott Lancaster, Russell Crawford, Raphael Hallett, Timothy Lustig, Filippo Nereo
Keele University

## Abstract

Keele was founded on the principle of embedding interdisciplinary study in all aspects of education. The Keele curriculum has been through many stages of evolution and adaptation, yet has, for seventy years, always remained loyal to this originary commitment, maintaining a foundation year, a rich dual honours offer and an unusually strong, cross-faculty capacity for 'elective' study.

In order to re-invent this concept to address the greatest challenges in modern society, a student-staff policy group (Keele Elective Pathways Steering Group) was co-founded by a student and staff member to look into enhancing the interdisciplinary offer. This resulted in the 'Keele Elective Pathways' (KEP), through exploration of the optionality of interdisciplinary themes with elective modules. Students were also heavily involved in the co-design process – which included developing the working group – and over 150 students completed the survey and ten students attended the focus groups.

The partnership enabled us to agree innovative approaches to teaching and assessment with regard to the development of interdisciplinary awareness of societal challenges, and employability skills and workplace agility.

## Introduction and context

Keele Elective Pathways (KEP) is a new initiative, enabling students to enhance their programme of study by choosing from elective modules within clearly structured groups or 'pathways' (figure 1). It has built upon approaches such as Broadening[1] (University of Leeds, launched 2014) and Manchester's University College of Interdisciplinary Learning[2] (launched 2015) by allowing enhanced degree certification as well as interdisciplinary routes of learning. Each elective pathway focuses on an area with contemporary social relevance, bringing together modules with cross-disciplinary appeal as well as their innovative and inclusive teaching and assessment – in line with Keele's founding principles (Kolbert, 2000). These modules offer exciting and cutting-edge content, while enabling students to develop the skills for life after graduation – in line with Keele's Vision for Education[3] (Keele University, 2018).

---

[1] https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/Broadening

[2] http://www.college.manchester.ac.uk

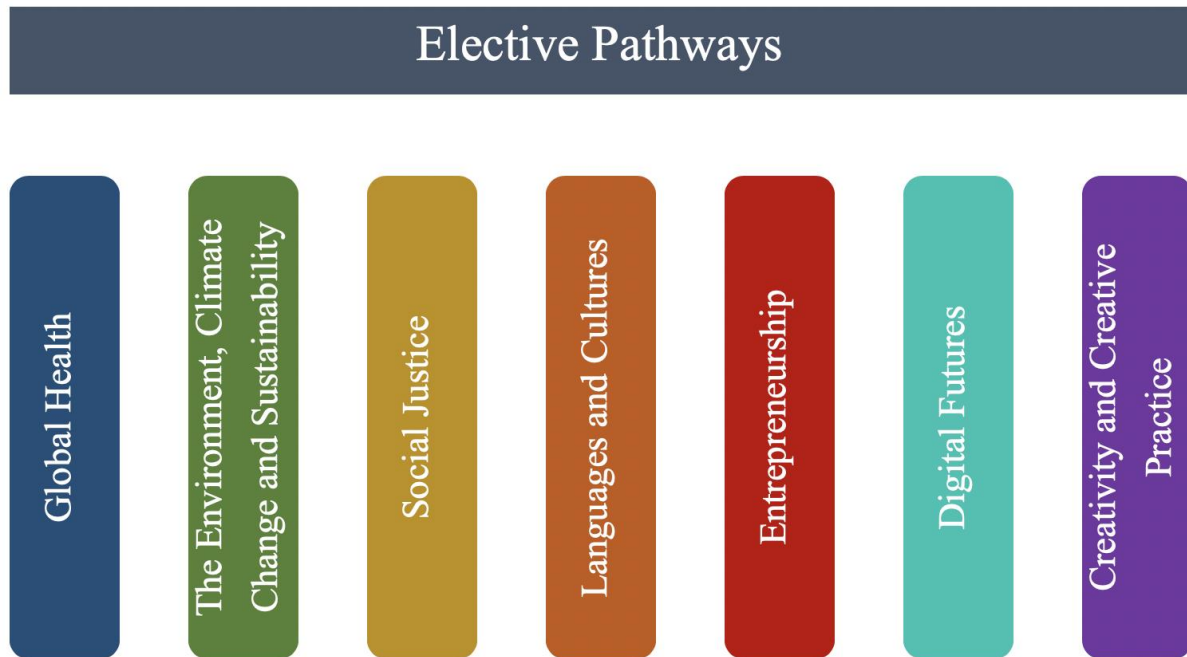[3] https://www.keele.ac.uk/kiite/visionforeducation/

**Figure 1**. Elective Pathways themes

**The policy group's approach**

In order to explore student perceptions of the KEP at Keele, we – the student-staff policy group – decided to run a focus group to seek key themes and student understanding of the opportunities elective pathways represent. The focus group consisted of ten students from across all years of study and from a range of subject disciplines, with at least one student present from each of the three Keele faculties (medicine and health sciences, humanities and natural sciences), thus allowing for a representative balance of opinion.

Two student facilitators conducted the group and every participant provided informed consent before taking part in the discussions, having already been advised of the subject and having this re-confirmed on the day. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from discussions at any time and that their opinions would be fully anonymised.

**Evaluation**

We would like to share two key findings that emerged from the focus group discussions:

- Students have a *positive perception* of those benefits of engaging in the KEP that centre on employability as the main strength;
- Students would decide on which specific pathway to engage with on the basis of the *type(s) of assessment* utilised in a given pathway as much as the subject of that pathway.

**Employability**

Students viewed completion of a KEP as being separate from – and an addition to – their core degree programme. There was an emergent perception that having completed a KEP was useful beyond the simple experience of having engaged with it. One student perception

that came out of the group discussion – that the learning gained from a KEP was valuable only if employers clearly understood how it was accredited – was, to us, striking and significant. Such comments as *"Employers, would they know what that meant or if they asked you what it meant…..what it would mean?"* and *"Definitely keep it consistent, the term, so everyone knows what they are talking about"* revealed an underlying feeling that the investment in KEPs was worthwhile, provided that the pathways had clarity and currency outside the university environment.

This finding also strengthened the student-staff policy group's commitment to designing assessment types, within the pathways, that offered students portable and tangible outputs to show to employers (see section below). The discussions were followed up by a meeting between us and the academic employability advisers, as well as a focus group within Keele's *Employer Advisory Group*, so that we could add employer perceptions to the intelligence-gathering process.

The students also felt strongly that KEPs were beneficial because a) the pathways allowed them to 'stand out' to employers by providing discussion/interview talking points and evidence and b) they were a unique selling point in both interview and selection processes in general. Such comments as *"It's always an extra thing to talk about in interviews, just to differentiate yourself would definitely be beneficial" and "something just a bit different"* revealed a positive perceived value in using the KEP experience anecdotally as part of a rigorous employability strategy.

We interpret these feelings as linking intrinsically with the concept of student identity, in the sense that there is a perception that Keele Elective Pathways allow personalisation – in a highly marketable form – of both a student's academic interests and her/his student journey.

## Assessment

Notable findings from our focus group discussions were the importance that students place on the number and type of assessments and the extent to which they choose modules based on assessment practices. Specifically, it was revealed that the ratio of final exams to coursework was a key factor and, in cases where there was a mix, the percentage of each influenced, for pragmatic reasons, the pathway choice made. One individual captured this idea by suggesting:

*"There are a huge number of people who are not picking the really useful electives because […] you just get more and more exams in your core modules as you go along, so you are at the point where all of your core modules are exams in third year and you have to pick the others".*

Also interesting was that, in some contexts, assessment modes may put students off their KEP choice, as this opinion indicates: *"There are also a lot of subject people want to do but there are also exams, so people just can't do it"*. This comment suggests that the assessment pressures of particular modules may be foremost in the minds of some students during the module selection process. In short, across a KEP, the collective volume of words associated with assessment was a strong determinant in students' weighing up the value-to-benefit ratio when considering investing themselves in a specific route. *"Most people prefer coursework […] if it`s 100% exam, people don't want to do it"* and *"Group assessed work,*

*people tend to avoid […] never heard anything say anything good about group assessed work"* both offer insight into the ways that assessment on an KEP can shape both the perception of its logistical difficulty and its success overall.

With Giley and Clarkston's (2014) two-stage exam process having shown significantly higher attainment in group-assessed work than in individually assessed work, more exploration of this area would be interesting, to see how students' experience and attainment might be further improved. Our recommendation is that elective pathways should prioritise authentic, coursework-based assessment (Kohl, 2017) that foreshadows contexts of applied learning and workplace outputs, so that students have a clear idea of what the pathway would add in terms of learning outputs and legacy.

## Conclusion

Discussion consensus was that a KEP allowed students to 'try something different' – so displaying the highly interconnected nature of learning and experience (Stein, 2018) – provided that the pathway was, in terms of valuable, manageable assessment, logistically compatible with their existing studies and linked to a clear articulation of the 'currency' of the KEP and its value to employers and students alike.

## Reference list

Gilley, B.H. and Clarkston, B. (2014) 'Collaborative testing: Evidence of learning in a controlled in-class study of undergraduate students.' *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 43(3), 83-91. Available at: https://www.sei.ubc.ca/bitstream/seima/2072/1/Gilley-Clarkston_2-Stage_Exam_Learning_JCST2014.pdf (Accessed: 25 June 2019).

Keele University (2018) *Our Vision for Education*. Available at: https://www.keele.ac.uk/kiite/visionforeducation/Our%20Vision%20for%20Education%20A3%20Poster%20v1.pdf (Accessed: 24 June 2019).

Koh, K. (2017) 'Authentic Assessment' In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. Available at: https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-22 (Accessed: 05 December 2019).

Kolbert, J.M. (2000) *Keele: The First Fifty Years: a Portrait of the University 1950-2000*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books Ltd. ISBN-10: 1858562384

University of Leeds (2014) *Broadening: expand your academic horizons.* Available at: https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/Broadening (Accessed: 25 June 2019).

University of Manchester (2015) *UCIL*. Available at: http://www.college.manchester.ac.uk/ (Accessed: 25 June 2019).

Stein, M. (2004) 'Theories of experiential learning and the unconscious.' In: Gould, L.J., Stapley, L.F. and Stein, M. (eds.) *Experiential learning in organizations*. Abingdon: Routledge, 19-36. ISBN-10: 1855759799