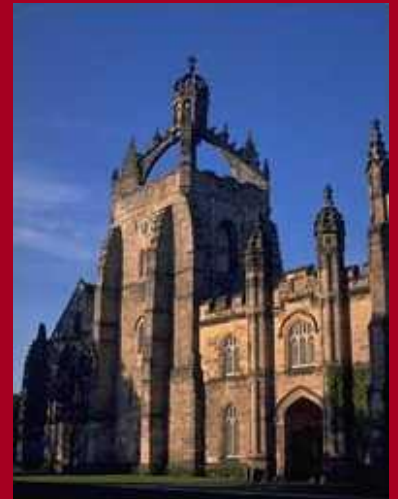# Enhancing learning: the Aberdeen approach
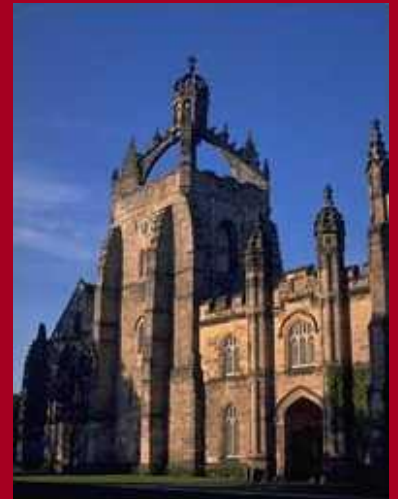
**Bryan MacGregor**
**Vice-Principal**

# 1. Overview

- **Why** we did Curriculum Reform

- **How** we did Curriculum Reform

  - *Process*

  - *Evidence base*

- **Final proposals**

- External and internal **reactions**

- **Implementation and progress**

- **Graduate attributes**

# Why we did Curriculum Reform

# 2. Genesis

- In **November 2006**: the then Principal proposed to Senate a 'full scale review of the curriculum available to students'.

- In **February 2007**: Principal's Essay urged 'an intensive review of the curriculum' to consider 'the most effective possible education' for all students and make it 'is consistent with the needs of the society we serve'.

- **The high ground**: curriculum review is a responsibility of any group of scholars.

- **The prosaic**: in a competitive national and international environment, need to review, to maintain strengths and strive for excellence.

- Central part of the **University's Strategic Plan 2007-10**: ambition 'To be one of the top 100 world-leading universities.'

# 3. Objectives

- The primary objectives of Curriculum Reform are:

  o *to make our approach distinctive within the UK and aligned with developments in some of the world's leading universities;*

  o *to enhance the learning experience;*

  o *to enhance disciplinary study;*

  o *to produce better informed, more rounded and more intellectually flexible graduates; and*

  o *to design programmes which are more attractive to students; more relevant to employers; and more relevant to wider societal needs*

# How we did Curriculum Reform

# 4.  The Commission

- November 2007 - **Curriculum Commission** began its meetings with a remit:

  *'To review and make proposals for the reform of our education objectives, programme structures and curriculum content, with a view to developing a high quality, distinctive and attractive educational experience for undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Aberdeen, which takes account of developing international approaches.'*

- Commission had wide membership – senior and junior staff and students 26 (3 students)

- **Steering Group** to hear evidence and direct initial stages - 11 (1 student)

- Other groups: Student Experience Group; Business, Industry and Professions; Research Group; Resources Group

# 5. Meetings and reports

- First meeting of the Commission – November 2007

- Commission met 29 times; Steering Group 27 times

- First Report - February 2008; Second Report - July 2008

- Draft Final Report - September 2008

- Final Report – October 2008

- Approved by Senate in October 2008, Court in November 2008

# 6.   Evidence base

- The evidence base for the proposals included:

    o *A **desk study** of the strategic context;*

    o ***Internal consultations** and feedback on the reports;*

    o ***External consultations** with a wide range of interest groups;*

    o *Overseas **trips** to other universities*

    o ***Market research** on the views of applicants, parents and employers;*

    o *A **survey** of guidance teachers; two **surveys** of students' opinions.*

# Final proposals
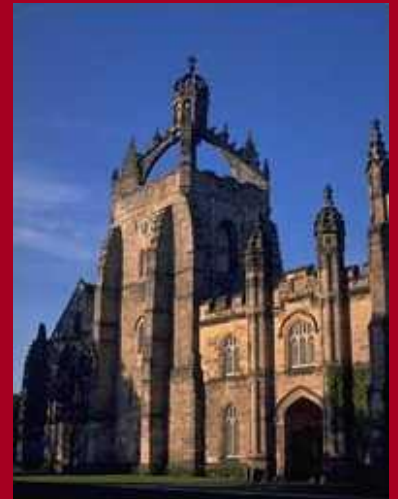
# 7.  Key proposals

- A set of **Aberdeen Graduate Attributes**

- A **five year framework** with exit qualifications at all years; and flexible entry to and exit from any year.

- A series of **Enhanced Study** options to produce better informed, more rounded and more intellectually flexible graduates (special new **Sixth Century Courses**; **Sustained Study** in languages and business; or greater choice).

- Comprehensive **programme** and **course review**.

- The development of **flexible learning spaces**.

- Enhanced **student support**: pre-entry partnerships with school and colleges; enhanced induction on arrival; and 'one stop shops'.

- The development of a **Co-curriculum** (work placements, study overseas, voluntary work); enhanced engagement with employers**.**

# 8.  Enhanced Study

- Students are allowed a free choice of Enhanced Study for 25% of years 1 and 2; and 12.5% of years 3 and 4.

- There are three types of Enhanced Study

  - Sixth Century Courses;

  - Sustained Study Programmes;

  - Discipline Breadth Courses.

# 9.  Sixth Century Courses

- **Sixth Century Courses** are specially-designed:

  *'to consider and contrast different approaches to knowledge and different methods of enquiry and, normally, examining real world problems'*

  and:

  *'to show how different disciplines work, to introduce and compare the fundamental perspectives of a number of disciplines and, normally, apply these to real world issues and problems.'*

- For 2010, there are 11 courses (most in both half sessions):

  | Oceans and Society | Science and the Media | The Mind Machine |
  |---|---|---|
  | The Natural World | Mankind in the Universe | The Digital Society |
  | Humans and Animals | Sustainability | Fearsome Engines |
  | Risk | The Health and Wealth of Nations | |

# 10. Sustained Study

- **Sustained Study Programmes** enable a student to undertake intensive study for **two years** in a subject which is not part of their core degree programme.

- Some are entirely knew; some are built from existing courses.  There are 13 SSPs:

  - Six modern languages (French, Gaelic, German, Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin Chinese)

  - Business; Computing

  - Biblical languages; Latin; The Classical Tradition

  - Building Better Bodies (working title)

  - Conservation and the Environment

# 11.  Discipline Breadth

- Subject to normal degree regulations, ANY course may be considered Discipline Breadth if it is NOT:

    - A **compulsory** course within a degree programme;

    - A **restricted option** with a degree programme (students must choose from a prescribed list); or

    - A **pre-requisite** or a **co-requisite** for one of the above.

# Graduate attributes
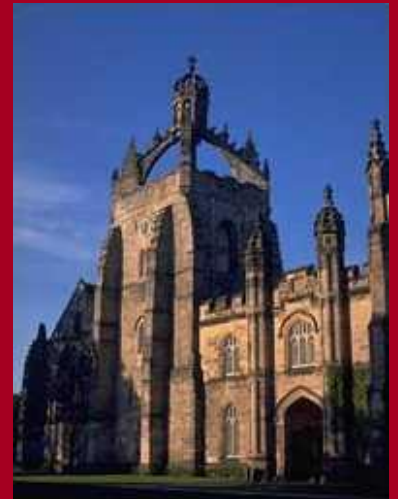
# 12. Graduate attributes

**Academically excellent**

*In-depth discipline knowledge; Breadth of knowledge; Contextual Understanding*

**Critical thinkers and effective communicators**

*Synthesis and analysis; Informed argument and reasoning; Diverse set of transferable and generic skills*

**Open to learning and personal development**

*Openness to, and interest in, lifelong learning; Self reflection*

**Active citizens**

*Appreciation of ethical and moral issues, social and cultural diversity, and enterprise and leadership*

# 13. Acquiring the attributes

- The attributes are firmly grounded in the CREF **research** results.

- The University **cannot** guarantee that all graduates will acquire the attributes.

- The attributes **cannot** all be acquired only from the formal curriculum but require the totality of the University experience.

- The University **can** provide the opportunities to acquire the attributes, and for students to monitor their progress.

# 14.  ACHIEVE and STAR

- **ACHIEVE -** The Graduate Attributes WebCT site:

  - *Familiarises students with the Attributes;*

  - *Enables self-assessment of achievement and development needs;*

  - *Provides interactive resources;*

  - *Reflection and recording of progress;*

  - *Links to University services which help to improve skills.*

- **STAR (Students Taking Active Roles)**:

  - *Achievement of five of the Graduate Attributes (employability related);*

  - *Involves: training; participation; reflective log; and assessment;*

  - *Employer involvement throughout: development; delivery; assessment and evaluation.*

# 15. ACHIEVE

# External and internal reactions

# 16.   External consultations

- 'Hearings' held in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and London; plus civil servants and politicians

- Universally positive responses

| Category | Invited (104) | Attended (49) |
|---|---|---|
| Employer organisations | 9 | 24 |
| Professional bodies | 48 | |
| Public bodies | 6 | 4 |
| Education authorities | 5 | 17 |
| Schools | 20 | |
| FE colleges | 5 | |
| Miscellaneous | 11 | 4 |

# 17. Internal engagement

- University-wide **open meetings**:  seven to outline the review process; six to receive comments on the First Report; and six to receive comments on the Third Report

- Open **School meetings**: 36 (3 x 12) as above

- Four meetings with **specific groups** at their request

- Regular meetings with **Students' Association Executive**

- Websites (one for students); live webcasts; email updates; blog; discussion boards; hearings; newsletter

- **Formal reports** to the University Management Group, the Senate and the Court

# 18. Internal reactions

- The '**Two Cultures**'; multiple realities

- The **discipline focu**s - dilution

- Research and crowding out – **extra work**

- How will it **affect me**?; **FTEs**

- Levels of **engagement**:

    ➢ *Disinterest*

    ➢ *Full and informed; the zealots*

    ➢ *The hidden agenda; wait for proposals before reaction*

    ➢ *Sceptics – but argument*

    ➢ *The opponents: priors versus evidence*

    ➢ *Misinformation and rumours– say it often enough …….*

# 19. Responding

- **Information** and **openness**

- The **opinion formers**

- **Evidence**; discussion; compromise and consensus

- The reassuring **external voices**

- Student **involvement** and support ..... but transition

- Senior **engagement**

# Implementation and progress
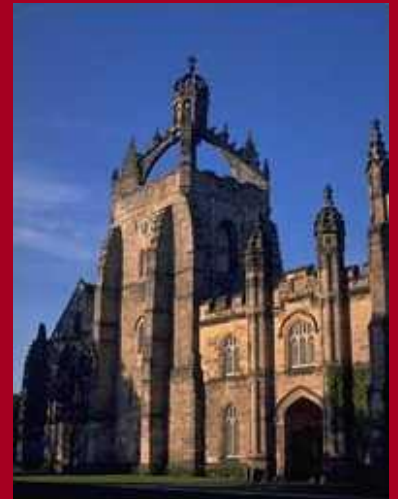
# 20.  Implementation

- Administrative structures and capital investments – from **September 2009**.

- Curriculum content and regulations - from **September 2010**.

- Full implementation will take **five years**.

- An **Implementation Board** to oversee, monitor and review implementation – started November 2009; but now 'embedded'.

- Other **analysis** and **plans**: resources; risk analysis; detailed implementation timetable; communication and marketing plans.

# 21. Progress and early take-up

- Implementation is going well and is **on schedule**.

- Focus has shifted to the **co-curriculum** and the **curriculum for 2011**.

- September 2010:

  - Eleven **Sixth Century Courses**: total 1377 (c50%); range 84-189

  - Thirteen **Sustained Study Programmes**: c500

  - **First year language courses**:

    - *'Like for like' [French, Gaelic, German and Spanish]: 1726 (+35%)*

    - *'Like for like', with Latin: 1824 (+40%)*

    - *Including Arabic and Mandarin: 2115 (+61%)*

# 22.  Finally ......

- A distinctive approach but not unique:

  - *Aligned to best practice **internationally**;*

  - *Firmly based on **research** (what students want; what employers want; what graduates do);*

  - *Embedded in **broadly-based** Scottish education philosophy;*

  - *Strong **disciplines** set within a **wider intellectual context** to produce more flexible graduates;*

  - *Early exposure to the **world of work**;*

  - *Evidence for **achievement** of graduate attributes; and*

  - *Recognition of **co-curriculum** activities.*

# Progress and evaluation

- Implementation is going well and is **on schedule**.

- Focus has shifted to the **co-curriculum** and the **curriculum for 2011**.

- **Measurable** and **immeasurable** …. but:

  - Student completion rates; graduate employment rates

  - Advisory Panel for ALL degree programmes

  - Number and uptake of new courses; number of students on work placements and studying abroad

  - Use of on-line self evaluation software; use of facilities

  - Student satisfaction; feedback from Students' Association

# ACHIEVE

- **ACHIEVE -** The Graduate Attributes WebCT site

  - *Familiarises students with the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes;*

  - *Enables students to self-assess achievement and development needs;*

  - *Provides interactive resources, self-assessment tests and exercises;*

  - *Facilitates reflection and recording of progress in an ePortfolio;*

  - *Helps students to take the opportunities available to develop their skills through their taught courses and also through co-curricular activities;*

  - *Provides links to University services, including the Student Learning Service and the Careers Service, which help to improve skills.*

- Multi-approach and longitudinal evaluation is planned

# STAR

- Achievement of five of the Graduate Attributes (employability related) will be through **Students Taking Active Roles (STAR)**, which involves:

  - *An introductory session;*

  - *Participation in a specified Students' Association or community volunteering role;*

  - *Selection of a STAR Award level – bronze, silver or gold;*

  - *Two workshops on skills development and interview technique;*

  - *Maintaining an ePortfolio-based reflective diary; and*

  - *Undertaking an assessed competency-based interview to measure achievement of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes.*

- Employer involvement throughout: development; delivery; assessment and evaluation.

# Some lessons/advice

- **Precision** of remit

- Senior **engagement**

- Administrative **support and budget**

- Need for **research**

- **Open and transparent** process

- **Representation and involvement**

- **Consultation and communication** - opportunity and take-up

- Adequate **resources and incentives**

- Long walks on the beach

- 'Vision without strategy is a daydream'