

## Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design Update from Project Interim Reports May 2010

### 1 Introduction

This is a summary that attempts to synthesise key findings from the April 2010 interim reports for the Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design Programme (the Design Programme for short). This should be viewed as a first trawl of the reports that draws out key 'headlines' and significant updates since the last set of reports. The aim of this paper is twofold:

- To help 'fast-track' the work of the support team by highlighting key points that various members of the team may wish to explore further in the follow-up calls.
- To form the basis of public facing updates that may be communicated in a variety of ways – most obviously via blog posts.

This summary thus differs from the more in-depth synthesis and mapping activities carried out by the synthesis consultants although it is to be hoped that the two will inform one another in an iterative way.

### 2 Methods

This summary will be made available to the programme support team at the same time as the individual team members' feedback on the project reports. It will be updated in the light of the outcomes of the follow-up calls and the work undertaken by the synthesis consultants. Once agreed as suitable for publication it will either be published in its entirety (minus this pre-amble) and/or in sections as posts on the Support Team blog.

The summary broadly follows the main headings used in the previous report by Helen Beetham (Dec 2009) although these have been slightly adapted to reflect the current state of the projects and to facilitate cross-comparison with a similar update on the Curriculum Delivery Programme.

### 3 Baselineing

At the time of the previous report the projects had recently completed baselineing activities during which they reviewed their institutional curriculum design processes. A full report on the baselineing was prepared by Helen Beetham in which it was noted, *'Partly because of the unique value of the curriculum at accrediting institutions, systems for developing it are usually concerned with quality and due process rather than flexibility and responsiveness.'*

Despite this many projects found that their institutional processes were fit for purpose rather than fundamentally flawed. Bolton indeed went so far as to say, *'One of the most surprising findings from our work is that apart from a few 'rough edges' the validation regulations and process are reasonably agile and responsive. WE believe that technology does have a role to play in supporting the creative process of designing new courses and of saving labour, but the validation processes themselves are in reasonable shape – they don't inhibit change'*.

This presents an interesting contrast with the views of the Birmingham City University's T-SPARC project who felt that the *'focus on the products of curriculum design rather than the process of curriculum design distracts activity away from rich team discourse and innovative solutions to curriculum design challenges.'* They concluded that *'approval practices tend to stifle innovation and require a documentary overhead that is perceived by staff as being disproportionate to its value.'*

At either end of the spectrum the baselineing work and capturing the 'As Is' situation has proven valuable and has been a staging point towards a new level of dialogue with stakeholders. Amongst the issues being followed up a number of common themes emerge and are discussed further below.

City University, after reflecting on its baselining, has come up with a useful set of research questions that are now directing its plan of work and which would be helpful to others undertaking similar reviews.

- What activities do programme teams undertake when designing new modules and programmes?
- What frameworks, models or approaches do programme teams use when designing modules and programmes
- What aspects of undertaking programme design do teams find easy, what do they consider hinders this process and what would they like changed?
- What support would programme teams like when designing modules and programmes?
- What stakeholders have an interest in programme design?

## 4 Different perspectives on the programme

### 4a Challenges

The projects are now operating in an economic climate that is vastly different to that in which the project outlines were conceived. In essence the original challenges that provided the drivers behind the project objectives have not changed but they are now taking place against a background of immediate restructuring and cost savings. The projects now face the additional challenge of achieving their long term strategic goals in the face of immediate operational issues.

A number of the projects found that major changes in leadership and institutional restructuring began fairly early in the project lifecycle and this is now spreading. Any project with a four year life span will inevitably face changes in staffing both within the project team and amongst key stakeholders but this is now occurring on an unprecedented scale. Evidence of institutional commitment at the highest level was a prerequisite for funding these projects yet there remains a risk that 'new brooms' will have different priorities. Both the projects and the programme will have to go a process of reaffirming commitment to a set of shared goals.

The way in which the projects are going about this shows great awareness of, and responsiveness to, their institutional context and priorities. Rather than try to aggrandise their own achievements and promote their project 'brand' many are aligning themselves to other initiatives and are content to be seen in a supporting role. For example City University's PREDICT project is linked to a Review of Undergraduate Education and the Strategic Learning Environment (SLE) Review project but is deliberately working in the background to avoid stakeholders feeling stressed by too many different initiatives. Birmingham City University's (BCU) T-SPARC project describes itself a '*nested within*' the wider ROLEX (Redesign of the Learning Experience) initiative. Parallels can be seen in other JISC programmes, particularly the Flexible Service Delivery Programme, where a number of projects describe themselves as taking a 'guerilla' approach to transformational change. By this they mean they are providing specific solutions to institutional problems in order to win gradual support for the broader strategic approaches they advocate rather than trying to 'sell the big idea' up front. The Design projects certainly started out with the 'big idea' but are needing to find pragmatic responses to the realities of the current climate.

Alignment to other initiatives is an effective approach to embedding and ensuring the sustainability of project outcomes it nevertheless brings its own set of issues in terms of evidencing the specific value of the project. The difficulty of attributing elements of transformational change to specific interventions is well known in our environment but particularly evident in relation to these projects. The projects are responding with well-thought out evaluation approaches but there is a real challenge for the programme as a whole to demonstrate its impact during a period of such upheaval.

It is encouraging however that there is evidence that the development of the relationship between the project and its wider context is a two-way process rather than the projects simply seeking safety in the embrace of bigger initiatives. A clear example is the way the baselining undertaken by the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Supporting Responsive Curricula (SRC) project has influenced the creation of a wide-ranging academic change initiative for 'Enhancing the Quality and Assessment for Learning' (EQAL). An Institutional Audit last autumn appeared to pose a risk to project deadlines in terms of delaying process change and new developments but it has

indeed proven a catalyst for the University to take on board outcomes of the baselining process and build them into the EQAL initiative.

QAA processes, albeit under a slightly different regime in Scotland, have also benefited the Strathclyde Principles in Patterns (PiP) project. During the Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR) process the ELIR team were positive about some of the solutions PiP was offering and the external perspective was helpful in securing institutional support for changes to the approval process. Strathclyde is one of the institutions undergoing major structural change and PiP appears to be viewed as helping to address some important strategic issues.

This level of success is of course a double-edged sword for projects. PiP is currently bidding for additional resource from the University to address additional areas relating to the relationship between approval and review and graduate attributes. The BCU T-SPARC project has scope creep as a live risk and Greenwich UG-Flex project is also finding that scope creep is becoming a major issue. The project undertook a review of the University's review and validation processes and made four recommendations. Having been guided not to restrict solution identification solely to the immediate scope and resources of the project, only one of the recommendations was within the scope of the UG-Flex project to deliver. This distinction proved to be a subtlety that was difficult to convey to project stakeholders and the project team was obliged to assist in other areas in order to build on the goodwill and confidence the project is generating.

The Cambridge Course Tools project has encountered similar issues in terms of the desire to align with institutional priorities sometimes resulting in stakeholder pressure to undertake activities that do not fit well with the overall project goals. In this case the project Steering Group was instrumental in reviewing the overlap between different stakeholder interests and helping the project refine the scope of the plan e.g. there is a general interest in improving the timetabling process but the project will only address issues with a specific impact on improving curriculum flexibility and innovation. Staffordshire in its turn has noted the tension between pressure to focus on 'orthodox' issues and the desire to approach things more innovatively and refers to the risk of being '*tethered to deliver the relatively minor benefits of administrative improvements*'.

Greenwich has provided a helpful set of questions for projects in a similar situation wondering whether to accommodate stakeholder requests to achieve a 'quick win':

- Has the project identified clear overall goals, deliverables and activities?
- do you have a strong sponsor/champion with sufficient influence to deliver the quick win?
- is the balance between investment of time and impact of change weighted towards low investment and high impact?
- are the main beneficiaries of the change central to the wider change your project seeks to deliver?
- to what extent is the change proposed a recognised/shared business imperative?
- are you confident that the primary agents of change will deliver what they promise in the required timescale?
- Is the project in a position to delegate work to others and/or lever additional resources?

#### 4b Processes

As the projects continue to reflect on the outcomes of their baselining work and to use the outputs to actively engage with stakeholders a number of common issues seem to be emerging.

**The Business Case for Curriculum Development:** Many issues concern the stage before the detailed design and approval process and the need to look at the rationale and market for new courses. At Cardiff the PALET Project is seeking to make Business Planning a more explicit part of the Programme Approval Process and is exploring how any risk associated with programme developments will be identified and managed. The OU has developed a range of 7 different Course Views including pedagogy profile and cost effectiveness (the others are course map, course dimensions, learning outcomes, task swim-lane, and course performance) and the Staffordshire ENABLE project is questioning its approach to market research prior to course development. The Bolton Coeducate project is seeking to develop a business model based on 'Open Learning.' The report states, '*this is a radical proposal but illustrates the extent to which we are questioning our current business models.*'

**Representing the curriculum:** The previous summary by Helen Beetham noted the issues that were already evident, *'Many problems with the management of course-related information can be put down to the fact that this is still a document-based rather than a data-based system (and paper-based at most institutions). This gives rise to duplication of effort and of information, lack of version control, poor re-use of relevant information for different purposes, and a tendency for information to be designed for approval rather than any other purpose.'* BCU is concerned with capturing the 'lived experience' of curriculum design. How to represent the curriculum in a way that can be reused to meet the needs of various stakeholders is the focus of other projects most notably the Open University and Strathclyde. The way in which Strathclyde is tackling the issue (for more on this see section 4c) is of widespread interest across the programme as other institutions including Leeds Met and Cardiff have noted that the tendency for different faculties to store information in different forms and media can make it difficult to re-use.

**The Relationship between Design and Delivery:** The link between design and delivery as viewed in terms of the relationship between approval and review processes has emerged as a key area for further work. BCU wants to see this as a continuum and is also interested in *Bridging the design spaces between curriculum design levels – programme, module and session.'* Other institutions would like to streamline the processes for making minor modifications in order to ensure that course documentation is actually kept up to date and reflects the realities of delivery. Strathclyde expresses the views of a number of projects: *'An important insight guiding current thinking concerns the relationship between the approval and review processes. Currently, programmes and modules are approved before any delivery has occurred with the result that significant changes from the approval plan are likely during first delivery. The project is exploring a potential new approach to approval and review in which newly-approved courses and classes might be revisited after their first implementation, with data from a planned review fed back and used to update the programme/module descriptions. In this way, delivery and review become an ongoing iterative process in which information from review is fed back to enhance module/programme documentation and to provide a history of delivery and subsequent enhancements. ... This might be relevant to all HE institutions that see approval and review as part of a wider enhancement agenda.'*

**Assessment:** This was a major focus of many of the Curriculum Delivery projects and is now becoming a significant issue for many of the Design projects. The Ulster Viewpoints project always intended to create a reflective tool for staff to be informed, inspired and to help them plan their assessment and feedback strategy, focusing on the student experience and based on [REAP](#) principles. In other cases the theme is emerging from baselining and stakeholder engagement. City University has identified a need to support staff writing programme specifications to ensure that assessment criteria are clear and compatible with the learning outcomes. As part of the document revision there will be much greater clarity for students about why specific approaches to learning and teaching are being used. Leeds Met is also aware of the need to communicate well with students around assessment: *'We need to ensure that students are not frightened off by the assessment. Part time work based students have many competing demands on their time and if they perceive the PLC assessment as being an immense and daunting task it is likely that they may consider dropping out of the module. To minimise this we are making the students aware that much of the module assessment is done through engaging in the activities and reflections as they study the component units.'* Staffordshire is addressing the issue in yet another way and has responded to stakeholder feedback and undertaken a review of the external examiner process.

The process of moving from the 'As Is' to the 'To Be' state seems to be moving many projects towards considering the principles and values that underpin curriculum design. This is most explicit in the case of City University where the Project Board has requested the team to gain *'a sense of the values and principles underpinning curriculum design at City.'* This seems to be making explicit something that is implicit in a number of other project approaches. The Bolton [IDIBL](#) framework which was developed as an agile approach to the validation of certain types of programmes seems similarly to be based on a particular set of values and principles that underpin the academic rationale.

#### 4c Stakeholders

The projects have been conscious from the start of the need for effective stakeholder engagement and have very well thought out strategies.

BCU's Ladder of Engagement model (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tsparc/4165766007/sizes/l/>) has informed its thinking throughout the project and has been influential in helping other projects clarify their approaches. The team has also been very conscious of the need to make its outputs accessible to the widest possible range of stakeholders (<http://blogs.test.bcu.ac.uk/tsparc/2009/12/16/168/>) and has taken an innovative approach to creating informative and engaging videos whilst seeking to preserve the anonymity of some stakeholder views (<http://blogs.test.bcu.ac.uk/tsparc/2010/01/>).

City University's PREDICT project started out with the title '*Process Re-engineering Design for an Interdisciplinary Curriculum with Technology*'. Although the project acronym is unchanged the name has been revised to '*Promoting Realistic Engaging Discussions In Curriculum Teams*' which emphasises the part that stakeholder engagement has played in changing the focus from processes much more to conversations.

## Staff

The wide ranging nature of curriculum processes means that in some cases projects are surfacing issues that it is not within their remit to solve. In this context the role of the Project Sponsor and the nature of their sphere of influence will be important. In all institutions personalities and local politics play their part but it would nonetheless be interesting to map the different range of Sponsor influences. For example MMU's project sponsor is the Deputy Vice Chancellor for the Student Experience who is supported by a Pro-Vice Chancellor for Curriculum Innovation; the latter role may not have ready parallels in other institutions.

The fact that MMU has a Pro-Vice Chancellor for Curriculum Innovation and a champion for the Student Experience at its most senior level signals, a bold institutional commitment to its change ambitions even during difficult times.

The strategic importance of innovation is a point that is discussed in many of the project reports. In a number of cases the economic climate is widening the gulf between those who determine strategy and more conservative members of the institution particularly amongst academic staff. There appear to be a number of reasons for this:

One is the apparent contradiction that, whilst the bigger picture emphasises the importance of diversification into new markets, an immediate impact of the economic downturn has been an increase in applications for 'traditional' full-time undergraduate courses. This is particularly marked at Greenwich where, despite the project's intention to show real growth in flexible curricula by 2012, it is possible that significant growth in these areas may not be apparent until 2013/14. This phenomenon, mirrored during previous recessions, coupled with the fact that many universities are offering voluntary severance packages, means that universities will be faced with immediate operational issues such as increased class sizes (noted as a major issue in the Curriculum Delivery project reports) that impact on staff ability to innovate. Greenwich has responded to this by achieving agreement that '*the project team should take every opportunity to stress to stakeholders the underlying business need for the university to seek alternative markets by offering more flexible programmes in the longer term and to emphasise the project's association with longer term strategy rather than immediate operational issues.*'

The situation noted above gives ample ammunition to those who choose to view non traditional markets as marginal. Leeds Met noted that: '*Some staff do not recognise the challenges of sustainability, which require new markets and widening participation, particularly if their current targets are being met.*' The quote could equally well have come from Greenwich and Bolton has noted some academic scepticism around the notion of a work-based curriculum even though recruitment of part time and non HEFCE funded students is an institutional priority.

In some cases staff who have taught the same types of learners in the same ways for many years may simply not yet recognize the magnitude of the changes facing the sector. In other cases people may be driven by self-preservation and the feeling that now is a risky time to be trying something different. Greenwich noted: '*the project is seen as a threat or irrelevant/of limited importance in some areas where delivering flexibility involves considerable change/expense.*'

## Learners

Learners are of course the main beneficiaries of the project outcomes and projects are endeavouring to gain a learner perspective on their activities in a range of ways.

City University has been sensitive to the views expressed by learners to their Student Affairs Committee that students are concerned about the amount of questionnaires they are asked to fill in and about the other forms of data collection that are undertaken for various purposes. The PREDICT project has responded by analysing the range of data collected for other purposes and ensuring that this is used to maximum effect in the project.

BCU has recently launched a major university initiative in partnership with its Students' Union seeking to engage students in co-creation of the curriculum. The main vehicle for this engagement is the Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme, which allows for the employment of student partners to work with academic staff to develop or evaluate aspects of learning and teaching. This will offer a number of opportunities for learners to contribute to the T-SPARC project.

Greenwich has undertaken [World Café](#) type sessions with students at their induction to inform the work of the UG-Flex project.

Understanding the learner profile is particularly important in relation to meeting the needs of new and diverse markets. The Leeds Met PC3 project has found that certain student cohorts do not necessarily have the ready access to technology or the regular habit of accessing electronic communications needed to make the most of a technology-rich learning experience. The use of 'Where am I now?' profiles at the start of the course is helping the university identify and address these issues.

The Ulster Viewpoints project is creating an interactive 'Student Profiler' tool designed to help staff think about their potential student classes, and the implications of different groups of students, before they plan a curriculum for them. By getting academics to focus on what their students' potential needs are they aim to create more student-centred courses. The tool will give feedback and pointers on retention issues, on study skills development and resources and will provide a gateway to useful resources for staff.

#### *4d Technologies*

To a certain extent technology has taken something of a back seat in discussions across the programme and in the [CAMEL](#) meetings held by project clusters. The projects are making effective use of a wide range of technologies to support curriculum design but their emphasis is very much on people and processes.

Some of the projects are creating new tools. The Strathclyde PiP project has created a demonstrator tool to replace paper based class and course descriptors. The demonstrator version has achieved considerable standardisation of the range of forms in use in different faculties although it nonetheless recognises and handles disciplinary differences. It is already showing its potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the approval process and will be further enhanced to provide information about learning designs and a repository of pedagogical support materials.

The Ulster Viewpoints project set out to provide staff with a series of reflective online tools to aid the curriculum design process. The focus of the tools has been refined into four strands: Assessment and Feedback, Information Skills, Student Interactions and Creativity and Innovation. A series of face to face workshops designed to help develop and promote the tools have proven so popular that they are now seen as integral to the success of the project and the project scope has been amended to encompass both the tools and workshop elements.

The Cloudworks site is an essential element of the Open University's OULDI (OU Learning Design Initiative) project. [Cloudworks](#) is a social networking site for finding, sharing and discussing learning and teaching ideas and designs. The site readily exceeded its target number of users and now has 2376 registered users from 165 countries.

The use of e-portfolio tools is a feature of many projects. BCU is using the open source product, Mahara, and building confidence in the product although the extent of uptake by students is giving rise to some concerns about the scalability of the current setup. Leeds Met intended to purchase an institution-wide e-portfolio system that would also be used to support the work of the PC3 project. A decision on an institution-wide approach has however been delayed due to financial constraints and the project has purchased sufficient Pebblepad licences to meet its immediate needs. This has given Leeds Met the opportunity to observe the experiences of MMU with interest because the baselining work at MMU has led to a move away from the idea of a uniform institutional approach. The

report notes, *'This approach has clearly changed as it has become clear from baselining that the views of students, employers, professional bodies and staff are extremely diverse in terms of E-portfolios and a single tool or approach is no longer assumed.'*

An obvious risk in using certain Web 2.0 technologies is increasing reliance on applications that may initially be free at the point of use but which may not remain so. The most prominent recent example is the decision of Ning to end its free service. Leeds Met has been obliged to rethink its use of Ning to support the coaching approach. The impact on the OULDI project on the other hand has been positive as the 500+ members of the ELESIG community, who previously used a NING site, saw the affordances of Cloudworks as being useful in supporting some of their activities. They will in future use Cloudworks to disseminate resources, share and discuss publications and research readings in the field, and share practice. See <http://cloudworks.ac.uk/index.php/cloudscape/view/1968> and associated links.

JISC nonetheless remains committed to supporting the creation of free and open source tools and a number of projects are benefiting from a new tool, 'Archi', recently released by CETIS. [Archi](#) is a free, open source, cross-platform tool to create ArchiMate models. Archimate is an open and independent Enterprise Architecture modelling language that supports the description, analysis and visualization of architecture within and across business domains. Interest in the potential usefulness of Archimate to the Curriculum Design projects has been hindered by the entry cost of tools designed for Archimate modelling. Archi is aimed at newcomers to Archimate who do not necessarily aim to become experienced modellers but simply to be able to borrow and apply techniques or Architecture modelling in piecemeal (often opportunistic) fashion.

Interest in the possibility of extending the [XCRI: eXchanging Course-Related Information](#) standard to support a wider range of functions, such as supporting the validation and review process, remains high and Bolton has received a separate JISC grant to develop XCRI to expose learning outcome descriptions at the module level to offer a richer description for potential employers.

## 5 Transformation

These projects are concerned with institutional transformation which is never easy either to effect or to quantify and evidence. We have already noted the apparent contradiction that aligning with other strategic imperatives gives a better chance of sustainability but makes it increasingly difficult to attribute the specific impacts of the project. Similarly many reports have highlighted the difficulty of gaining support for strategic developments and innovation in the face of pressing operational concerns. The fact that so many of the projects have been readily embraced as significant contributors to addressing institutional strategic priorities is significant and encouraging.

A point which arises from a number of the reports is the extent to which some of the project outcomes could or should be mandated. The programme title implies a somewhat top-down approach and the projects are sponsored and led by senior managers; many of them are however far from 'mainstream' within their institutions.

The OU sums this up in relation to its activities:

*'To achieve the benefits of using a Learning Design Method i.e.*

- *It is repeatable*
- *A method is teachable*
- *It builds on experience – and lessons learnt*
- *It ensures everyone knows what to expect, where, when and how*
- *It can give an early warning of problems*
- *Its use is proactive not reactive*

*Its use would have to be mandated or its use would be reliant on pockets of interest.'*

The same could be said for many of the other projects e.g. the use of the Viewpoints tools, capturing the full richness of experience desired by BCU, applying the principles derived by City or using the developments in non traditional markets at Leeds Met, Bolton and Greenwich as models for large-scale transformation. Others such as Strathclyde may have their tools mandated but will the project receive the backing and extra resource to achieve maximum impact by addressing the full enhancement agenda? To put these questions into context the projects are not yet

halfway through their lifecycle. They are showing enormous potential to achieve significant transformation and it is to be hoped they will be enabled to realise this potential.

## 6 Other influences

This heading may seem somewhat superficial at this point since the reality is that 'other influences' have tended to dominate thinking in recent months. The effects of the economic downturn are being felt very sharply and the change in government is very recent at the time of writing. The Higher Education Academy is faced with drastic budget cuts and many credible authors feel that the demise of Becta (although it has met with mixed responses) does not bode well for the promotion of innovation in education.

## 7 Summary

It is a relatively short time since the projects completed their baseline reviews and many are still digesting the outcomes and adapting them to changed circumstances. It is inevitable therefore that, although the projects are continuing to produce a rich and useful set of deliverables, much of the reflection in the reports concerns the reappraisal/reaffirming of the place of the project within its institutional context.

The next few months will no doubt see a range of changes and a variety of institutional responses. The projects are providing very well considered responses to major strategic imperatives and it is important that this learning is shared for the benefit of the sector as a whole. Readers are encouraged to engage with the emerging project outputs via the [Design Studio](#) and a rich variety of project communications linked via the [Programme Blog](#).