Analysing curriculum development as an activity system: A study based in English universities

Anthony John Burke BSc MSc MRICS SFHEA

2020

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Lancaster University, UK

Declaration

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

Word count: 44,808* excluding references.

Signature 

*This was the word count of the original submission, prior to revisions following viva

Abstract

This study is concerned with the curriculum development process at English universities. The underlying premise for the study is that the challenges of curriculum development can only be fully understood by viewing the process holistically.

An extensive literature review identifies the key influences on curriculum development and the sources that guide course design. The review shows that curriculum development is a highly complex process involving multiple parties. Much of the literature in this field focuses either on conceptualisations of the curriculum or on the mechanics of the curriculum process. A theoretical framework based on cultural-historical activity theory is presented as a means of locating curriculum development in its broader social context.

Interviews were conducted at twelve English universities and the data was analysed by framing curriculum development as an activity system. The analysis identifies inherent structural tensions in the system and considers the implications of those tensions.

The study concludes that activity system analysis provides a valuable tool in analysing curriculum development holistically. The findings suggest that universities need to foster a deeper understanding of curriculum development and to take a more strategic approach to integrating the contributions of the parties involved.

Contents

Declaration i

Abstract ii

Contents iii

List of Figures ix

List of tables xi

Acknowledgements xii

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION 1

Overview 1

Context 1

Use of the term ‘curriculum development’ 2

The underlying challenge of curriculum development 3

The research problem and research questions 5

Positioning the study in relation to existing fields 6

Approach to the research 7

Significance of the research 8

Structure of the thesis 9

Summary 10

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW 11

Overview 11

Conceptualising curriculum 12

Modelling the factors that influence curriculum development 17

HIGH LEVEL INFLUENCING FACTORS 25

Higher education policy 25

Professional bodies 29

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS 30

The culture of the institution 30

Curriculum frameworks 33

Learning and teaching infrastructure 35

Students 40

Quality assurance requirements 41

THE DISCIPLINE 43

COURSE DESIGN 45

Outcomes-based course design 47

The detailed process of course design 50

Confusion at the heart of course design 56

Literature review summary 58

Chapter 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 61

Overview 61

Purpose of theory 61

Sociocultural theory 62

Activity theory 63

Rationale for using activity theory 65

Application of activity theory to the study of the curriculum 67

Overview of activity system components 70

Subject 71

Object and outcomes 71

Tools and artefacts 73

Community....74

Rules and norms....75

Division of labour....76

Contradictions (or tensions) within activity systems....77

Summary....79

Chapter 4: METHODOLOGY....80

Overview....80

The starting point....80

Philosophical perspective and associated research paradigm....81

Research strategy....82

Research approach....84

Framework for data collection....85

Data sources....87

Data collection and initial analysis....93

Detailed analysis....98

Relationship between literature review and data collection and analysis....105

Ethical considerations 108

Insider research 109

Concluding comment 111

Chapter 5: FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AS AN ACTIVITY SYSTEM 113

Overview 113

The activity system 113

The subject 114

The object (and outcomes) 122

Tools and artefacts 126

Community 136

Rules and norms 145

Division of Labour 154

Summary 160

Chapter 6: DISCUSSION BASED ON TENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS 161

Overview 161

Tensions and their implications 162

Summary of tensions and implications 174

Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS 176

Overview 176

Addressing the research questions 176

Significance of the research 185

Limitations of the research 188

Opportunities for further research 189

Closing comments 190

REFERENCES 192

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Product and Process Models of Curriculum Development 15

Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the relationship between influencing factors of curriculum development and the components of curriculum design. 18

Figure 3: Factors influencing curriculum 19

Figure 4: Curricular choices.....20

Figure 5: Academics' beliefs about curriculum influences 21

Figure 6: Curriculum design – through the analogy of a Ouija board 22

Figure 7: A model of curriculum development factors and components 24

Figure 8: Model of integrated course design.....48

Figure 9: A map of the course design process.....50

Figure 10: Curriculum Design Process 52

Figure 11: Map of the module development process 54

Figure 12: Vygotsky's triad of subject, object and mediating tools or artefacts.....64

Figure 13: Engestrom's model of a collective activity system.....64

Figure 14: Regional breakdown of universities in first round of interviews 92

Figure 15: Extract from analysis document providing commentary on the coded text and allocating an activity system component to each code 104

Figure 16: Activity system with Subject component highlighted 114

Figure 17: Activity system with Object and Outcomes components highlighted 122

Figure 18: Activity system with Tools & Artefacts component highlighted 127

Figure 19: Activity system with Community component highlighted 137

Figure 20: Activity system with Rules & Norms component highlighted.....146

Figure 21: Activity system with Division of Labour component highlighted.....154

Figure 22: Activity system for curriculum development with key themes from interviews summarised.....160

Figure 23: Activity system showing the themes and tensions to emerge from the study 174

List of tables

Table 1: Categories of university in England.....90

Table 2: Breakdown of institutions in first round of interviews.....92

Table 3: Characteristics of first-round interviewees 94

Table 4: Characteristics of second-round interviewees 96

Table 5: Summary of tensions, implications and developmental learning 185

Acknowledgements

The PhD journey is typically thought of as a solitary one, but I could not have completed it without the support of many people.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Department for Educational Research at Lancaster University for offering such a well-structured programme. I could never have undertaken a PhD alongside a demanding full-time job without the supportive environment provided by academic staff, support staff and students. Particular thanks go to my supervisor, Professor Malcolm Tight, for always responding so promptly and encouragingly to my queries and concerns. I have also really valued the friendship and support of fellow students in Cohort 21 who have shared much of the experience with me and made it so much more enjoyable than it otherwise might have been.

I am grateful to my employer for giving me the opportunity to embark on the PhD, and to my colleagues and students for stimulating my enthusiasm to pursue research in higher education. I would also like to thank all the higher education professionals at the twelve universities involved in this study who gave up their time to engage in the interviews. They were genuinely fascinating conversations, and I hope I have done them justice.

To my close friends and family – thank you for putting up with me when the whole thing was getting me down and for ensuring I kept a sense of perspective.

Finally, my love and thanks to my daughter, Anne-Marie, my son, John, and most of all my wife, Sally. It might sound like a cliché, but I genuinely could not have done it without you. I promise that this is the last qualification I will ever study for!

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This study is concerned with the practice of curriculum development in English universities. The research examines the factors that influence the curriculum and investigates the perceptions of the people involved in curriculum development within higher education institutions, including academic staff, managers, educational developers, quality assurance staff and students.

In this chapter I will set out the context for my study, explain the nature of the research problem, present my research questions and briefly summarise my approach to the research.

Context

Universities in the UK are required to comply with the Quality Code for Higher Education, published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2018a). The code sets out an expectation that "courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed" (p.3). Curriculum development may be seen as a core function that provides universities with "a major opportunity to deliver on the institutional mission" (Beetham, 2009, p.2). In effect, it is higher education's equivalent of product development (Ferrell, 2011), with the 'product' being a curriculum that meets the needs of the economy and society.

Given both the regulatory and 'business' imperatives of curriculum development one would expect it to be viewed as a priority activity in universities, and to be resourced

and supported accordingly. However, after almost thirty years in higher education, during which time I have had extensive involvement in curriculum design at all levels, I have seen little evidence to suggest that this is the case. As a module leader I have designed new modules and revised existing modules, and as a course leader I have been responsible for numerous course reviews and for the design of new courses. I have led a university-wide teaching and learning project which required all courses across the institution to be reviewed. I have chaired validation and review panels and I have acted as external advisor at numerous institutions. More recently, I have advised course teams across my own institution as they have undertaken the course design process. These experiences have left me with a strong perception that curriculum development is not afforded the attention it warrants by many institutions, and that the principles of curriculum design are not deeply understood by many of the key people involved in the process, including academic staff. Whereas the Quality Assurance Agency effectively promotes the process as a creative activity involving "the design and development of high-quality, relevant, market-attractive courses" (QAA, 2018b), I have found that course teams in particular often find curriculum development to be bureaucratic, time-consuming and somewhat tedious.

Use of the term 'curriculum development'

I have adopted the term 'curriculum development' as an umbrella term that refers to the framework within which the enhancement of the curriculum takes place. Ornstein and Hunkins (2016) suggest that 'curriculum development' refers to the processes and procedures associated with planning and implementing a curriculum. Curriculum development is influenced by political, social, regulatory, institutional and

disciplinary factors (Warren, 2016) that provide the context for design. As a subset of curriculum development, we can view course design as the way in which we shape the objectives, the content, the learning and teaching activities, and the assessment within the curriculum (Sloan, 2015). Thus, design is concerned with the rationale and philosophy of course, the content and structure, and the approaches to learning, teaching and assessment (Warren, 2016).

Curriculum development processes are usually triggered in response to a need to enhance, adapt or refresh the existing curriculum. The processes may lead to the introduction of a completely new course or, more commonly, as O'Neill (2010) indicates, the review of an existing course. Curriculum revision may be initiated for various reasons. At the most basic level, the requirement to periodically review a course may be laid down by a university's quality systems. Another common reason for curriculum revision is in response to a perceived problem with the existing course. For example, O'Neill (2010) identifies high drop-out rates on a course as one example of a "prompt" (p.65). A further trigger for course revision may be an institutionally-driven policy to reform the curriculum in response to social and economic challenges or pedagogical shifts (Hubball and Burt, 2004).

The underlying challenge of curriculum development

Effective curriculum development requires well-organised institutional support and procedures, as well as competence on the part of those involved. Academic staff are at the heart of the curriculum development process because, as Smith et al. (2013) note, the decisions taken by course teams as they design the learning experience form a key activity in curriculum design. As experts in their respective fields,

academic staff will be well-placed to determine the subject-related content which should be included in courses. However, curriculum development requires much more than expertise within a discipline. To design a course, the members of a course team need to recognise how course objectives are shaped and how learning, teaching and assessment activities are integrated (Sloan, 2015). In addition, they will be expected to navigate a path through complex institutional processes such as quality assurance, course approval, marketing, and information management (Smith, Killen and Knight, 2013). Thus, on the one hand curriculum development requires an understanding of the nature of the curriculum, yet on the other hand it takes place within a bureaucratic and regulatory framework and is subject to a diverse and fragmented range of influences.

There is an implicit expectation that academic staff will be competent in course design, and indeed the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching in higher education indicate that higher education professionals should be able to "Design and plan learning activities and/or programmes of study" (HEA, 2011, p.3). However, as O'Neill (2010) notes, academic staff may have limited experience in the curriculum design process and will often rely on advice from educational developers. The extent to which such advice makes a significant contribution to the process can be highly variable, and there is a risk that academic staff, motivated primarily by an enthusiasm for their subject, will default to a focus on course content. This can result in the broader aspects of the curriculum being overlooked, including an over-arching vision for the programme, programme-level outcomes, the teaching, learning and

assessment strategies of the programme, and the balance and coherence of the programme.

The research problem and research questions

The curriculum development process is one that involves many different parties and is subject to a diverse range of influences. The premise on which this study is based is that the challenges of curriculum development can only be fully understood by viewing the process holistically. Curriculum development is not an abstract, theoretical exercise, nor is it simply a mechanistic process that can be isolated from its context. It is a complex activity subject to a diverse and fragmented range of influences that is undertaken by humans who engage in activities within a community. A theoretical framework is required that enables us to locate curriculum development within its wider social context and analyse the complex relationships and practices that exist. Sociocultural theory is such a theory, and specifically a strand of sociocultural theory known as cultural-historical activity theory. My analysis of curriculum development considers it as an activity system (Engeström, 2001). Presenting it in this way allows the various social practices, norms, values and predispositions within the process can be analysed, and the tensions and conflicts within the system to be identified.

My research questions can be summarised as follows:

1. What factors and sources influence, guide and shape the curriculum development process in English universities?
2. To what extent can activity systems analysis provide a means of considering curriculum development holistically?
3. What inherent tensions are revealed by analysing the curriculum development process as an activity system?

4. What are the implications of such an analysis for the management of curriculum development in English universities?

Positioning the study in relation to existing fields

As noted above, I will argue that a holistic perspective is necessary in order to fully understand curriculum development. This raises the question of where the study should be positioned in relation to existing fields of research. There are two principal fields of study that are relevant to this research, namely higher education studies and curriculum studies.

As Bitzer and Wilkinson (2009) note, the field of higher education can be viewed from numerous different perspectives, and various attempts have been made to map the field in recent decades. Brennan and Teichler (2008) categorised four different 'aspects' of higher education research (p.261), namely: quantitative-structural aspects; knowledge aspects; aspects of processes and persons; and organisational aspects. Shay et. al., (2009) also identified four broad areas of research in higher education, namely: student learning; academic development; knowledge and curriculum; and institutional change (p.373). A more nuanced categorisation was set out by Tight (2012), who identified eight key themes based on an analysis of articles contained in specialist higher education journals. The themes were: teaching and learning; course design; the student experience; quality; system policy; institutional management; academic work; and knowledge and research (p.7). Tight's categorisation is particularly pertinent in the current context given that my study touches, to a greater or lesser extent, on each of the eight themes. As I will show in Chapter 2, the influences of policy, institutional culture and management, quality, the learning and teaching infrastructure, research, course design models, and

academic workloads are all relevant factors in the curriculum development process. On that basis, one might assume that the study sits squarely within the field of higher education studies. However, given the strong curriculum focus of the research, I cannot simply ignore the field of curriculum studies.

It might be argued that curriculum studies is not a distinct field, but rather a specialisation within the broader field of education (Pinar, 2004). Like higher education studies, curriculum studies in its broadest sense can be approached from numerous angles, including philosophical, sociological, psychological, political, economic, historical or anthropological angles (Goodlad, 2001). In the specific context of higher education, Shay (2016) points to the "contestation over curriculum" which manifests itself in "false choices" about what should be privileged in higher education and what the purpose of higher education is (p.767).

I will consider these aspects of the curriculum in more detail in Chapter 2, when I review the literature on conceptualisations of curriculum. Whilst my study of curriculum development must clearly consider the nature of the higher education curriculum, it is important to stress that it is not a conceptual study. Nevertheless, the study may be considered as lying at the intersection between curriculum studies and higher education studies.

Approach to the research

My research is grounded in an interpretivist philosophical position and seeks to understand the curriculum development process. The approach I have adopted may be referred to as a basic qualitative study in which I analyse the curriculum

development process as an activity system through the experiences of the various participants. I achieved this through conducting qualitative interviews at twelve English universities.

The data from the interviews were analysed thematically, and then systematically interpreted within a theoretical framework provided by the activity system. The interpretation provided the basis for the presentation of my findings.

I was conscious of the fact that part of the research would be conducted as an insider, and there would be a potential conflict between my role as a researcher and my simultaneous professional role. I endeavoured to address this by working in a reflexive manner, and continuously questioning my own assumptions and challenging my interpretations.

Significance of the research

As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, much of the current literature relating to the curriculum in higher education appears to reflect the diverse perspectives which can be taken. Ornstein and Hunkins (2016) note that the study of curriculum is "characterised as elusive, fragmentary and confusing" (p.19). There is a significant body of literature that takes a conceptual approach to the curriculum, considering the very nature of the curriculum itself and the role of teachers and students within it. Alongside this there are many publications that consider the regulatory, political, social and institutional influences on the curriculum. A further body of literature is focused on the mechanics of the course design process, whereby curriculum development is presented in procedural terms, setting out step-by-step approaches

to the construction of the curriculum. The literature on curriculum development in higher education therefore seems to be somewhat fragmented, with the conceptual aspects and the regulatory and practical aspects rarely considered in parallel. Of course, it is essential to have a conceptual awareness of the nature of the higher education curriculum, and to appreciate the impact of the various influences on the curriculum. There is also great value in having tried and tested models of curriculum design to guide the process. However, my argument is that we can only understand curriculum development and the problems that exist within it by viewing it holistically.

I suggest that activity theory offers us a means of analysing curriculum design by treating it as an activity system. This approach does not seek to ignore the importance of conceptualisation, nor to dismiss the significance of the various influences or undermine the value of curriculum design models. The analysis recognises the existence of the wider context and will identify the inherent tensions in the system.

Structure of the thesis

My thesis follows a traditional structure. A comprehensive literature review is presented in Chapter 2, providing a detailed examination of the various influences on curriculum development and the models that have been adopted for curriculum design. My theoretical framework is set out in Chapter 3, where I offer a rationale for the use of activity theory and explain the various components of an activity system. I describe my research design and methodology in Chapter 4 and justify the approach I have adopted. I present the findings from the interviews in Chapter 5 and relate

these specifically to the components of the activity system. In Chapter 6 I discuss the inherent structural tensions that are revealed by the activity systems analysis and consider the implications of those tensions. Finally, in Chapter 7 I offer my conclusions by specific reference to the research questions, and I consider the significance of the findings.

Summary

As noted by Anakin et al. (2017), curriculum change must take into account "individual histories, traditions, cultures and purposes" (p.2), and must be considered at multiple levels. I have acknowledged this point in this chapter by identifying the research problem and setting out my stall for the thesis. I will now proceed to the literature review where I focus in particular on the diverse factors that influence curriculum development and the models used to guide curriculum design.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

My intention in presenting this literature review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the concepts and themes that underpin my study of curriculum development, and to do so in a systematic manner. I will be directly addressing the first of my research questions by examining the factors and sources that influence, guide and shape the curriculum development process.

There is no shortage of literature on the curriculum in higher education. In a detailed analysis of 567 articles relating to higher education published in a single year, Tight (2012) found that course design and the student experience were the subject of over half of the articles. He notes that there are relatively few publications that take a general overview of course design, when compared to the large number that focus on specific aspects of the curriculum and course design. My own research for this literature review would certainly support this view. I found that there are plenty of books and articles dealing with the curriculum at a conceptual level, and countless publications covering the mechanics of course design and related issues. However, literature that takes a more holistic view of curriculum development seems to be somewhat limited.

I will begin by reviewing the various conceptualisations of curriculum but will devote the bulk of this chapter to examining in detail the factors that influence curriculum development and the sources that guide the course design process. The literature review will highlight the multiple perspectives to consider, in conceptualising the curriculum itself, in identifying the influences on the curriculum, and in seeking to

model the design process. Moreover, the review will reveal the somewhat fragmented nature of much of the literature in this field.

Conceptualising curriculum

As I noted in Chapter 1, this thesis is not a conceptual study, but it is nevertheless helpful to provide an overview of the nature of curriculum in order to bring to the surface some of the key concepts that underpin debates around curriculum. Whilst the word 'curriculum' has been widely used historically in higher education, the underlying concepts associated with curriculum are often given scant consideration. Barnett and Coate (2004) maintain that curriculum is effectively invisible in the debates about learning and teaching. It is tacitly assumed that everyone knows what is meant by curriculum, and yet the concept remains elusive. There is no universally accepted definition of curriculum and indeed, as Neary (2003) points out, definitions of the word do not of themselves solve problems associated with the curriculum. Nevertheless, Neary does acknowledge that it is helpful to be aware of the different perspectives from which curriculum is viewed.

Curriculum is often presented somewhat simplistically, as referring merely to the structure or content of programmes (Hicks, 2018). Such a view aligns with what Annala et al. (2016) refer to as the syllabus approach, or "curriculum as control over content" (p.177). In this view curriculum is seen simply as the knowledge that should be conveyed to learners. Such a conceptualisation has limited value because, as Hicks (2018) points out, it treats the curriculum as 'static' (p.9). Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) maintain that defining the curriculum in terms of what is to be taught means that any discussion of curriculum development or change is very narrow, because the

focus is simply on changes to the content that is being delivered. Thus, Annala et al. (2016) acknowledge that focusing primarily on the syllabus may actually "hamper rather assist in curriculum change or development" (p.172).

A second conceptualisation envisages a planned and coherent curriculum which is expressed in terms of predetermined learning outcomes and sequenced subject content, aligned with teaching and learning activities and assessment methods (Warren,2016). Such an approach is commonly described as the product, or rational, model of curriculum, and it gives particular weight to what Neary (2003) describes as changes in students' behaviour. There is a strong focus on plans and intentions as evidenced by intended learning outcomes. Annala et al. (2016) refer to the notion of "curriculum as producing competences" (p.178) and the approach is often seen as providing students with the competences required by the market. Since the 1970s, the shift away from traditional higher education, and the increased emphasis on degree courses as preparation for employment, has provided a context in which the product approach to curriculum has gained prominence in the UK and other countries.

The focus on learning outcomes has attracted significant criticism, and I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter, but as a reaction to the perceived constraints, alternative conceptions of curriculum have emerged. Knight (2001) argues that learning is complex and non-linear, and that rational curriculum planning, based on specifying the outcomes of learning, is problematic. Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) suggest that the alternative is to shift the emphasis away from structure and content towards the processes that enable students to learn. Annala et al. (2016) identify this

third conceptualisation as one that views the curriculum as an interactive process in which the ideas and aims of the curriculum are negotiated on the basis of the experience of the teachers, students and other stakeholders. They refer to the "curriculum as negotiating of potentials" (p.179). Neary (2003) claims that such an approach emphasises activities and effects, taking account of what teachers and learners actually do in the classroom. Warren (2016) summarises this approach as being more concerned with the students' experience and the desire to engage them in meaningful learning.

A fourth conceptualisation is referred to as "curriculum as empowerment" by Annala et al. (2016, p.181). They also refer to this by using the term "curriculum as praxis". They see this as a development of the process model in which a more practical approach is adopted, involving "a constant evaluation of what is valuable and what needs to be changed and why" (p172). In a similar vein, Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) refer to a curriculum that is dynamic and changeable, requiring modifications to suit particular circumstances. Hall and Smyth (2016) go further, arguing that curriculum as praxis offers a path for education to step outside the traditional, formal education context.

Whilst the discussion above has effectively presented four separate conceptualisations of curriculum, they are not entirely discrete, and there are overlaps between the various conceptualisations. O'Neill (2015) helpfully offers a simplified approach by consolidating the various approaches into two basic models, namely the product model and the process model, and illustrating the two models

graphically (Figure 1). The two models are contrasted by the relative weight attached to teacher control versus student control, and content versus social and life skills.

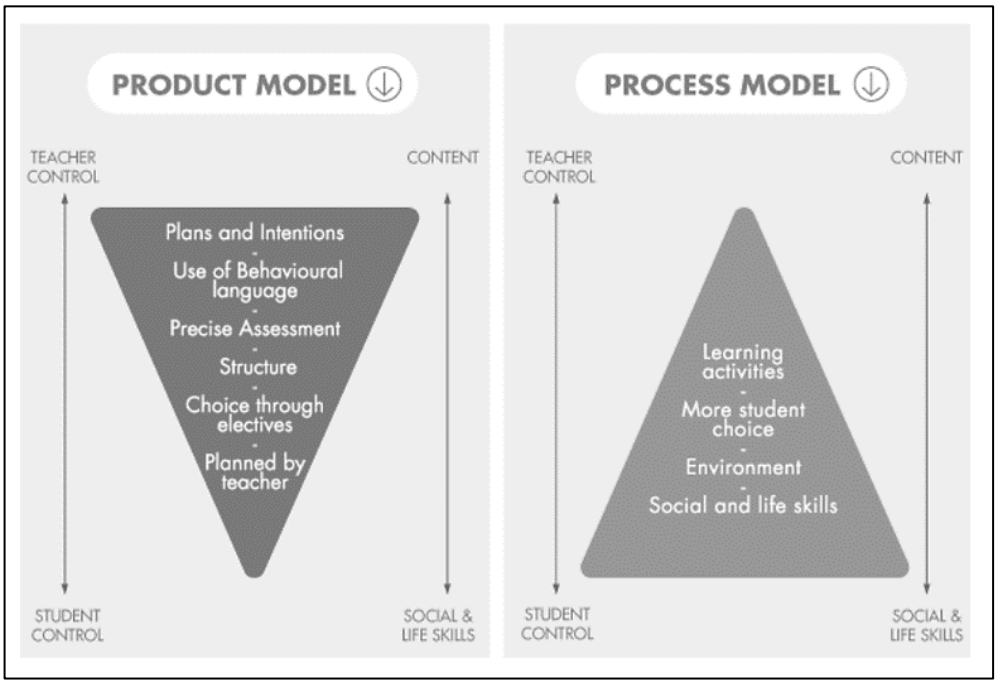

Figure 1: The Product and Process Models of Curriculum Development (Source: O'Neill, 2015)

The two models should not be seen as dichotomous and, as O'Neill (ibid.) notes, many programmes contain elements of both models, though may emphasise one more than the other. Warren (2016) describes a process of programme design (citing Hartman and Warren, 1994) which combines a rational approach considering end goals, with a process approach that focuses on student characteristics and learning processes. Nevertheless, whilst elements of the process model are widely adopted in higher education, it is noteworthy that the product model effectively underpins much of the official guidance. Barnett and Coate (2004) are highly critical of this, arguing that the assumptions behind university systems in the UK appear to be taken for granted and not open to discussion. This line of argument is developed by Cooper (2017) who notes, in an Australian context, that discussion about university learning

has tended to focus on “micro-levels” of curriculum enactment” (p122). Thus, there have been discussions about how student learning can be expressed behaviourally, but limited consideration of the validity of the underlying assumption that learning can be described behaviourally. The view of Barnett and Coate (2004) is that the increasing emphasis in higher education on the outcomes of learning can act as a constraint. Consequently, they maintain, a narrow view of curriculum has emerged which focuses on skills and knowledge at the expense of the key ideas such as “criticality and personal autonomy” (p.24).

Having presented an overview of the various conceptualisations of curriculum it is important to demonstrate how it contributes to my line of argument. Dillon (2009) bemoans the futility of attempting to define curriculum and presenting multiple alternative conceptions and definitions without explaining the purpose of doing so. I have two main reasons for setting out the foregoing discussion of curriculum. Firstly, perceptions of curriculum can have implications for curriculum development processes because curriculum change is implemented by individuals working within a higher education community. Course design cannot therefore be considered independently of its context because, as Anakin et al. (2017) note, the way in which individuals enact their definitions of curriculum has an impact on how and where curriculum change happens. The second reason is that detailed course design approaches are invariably founded on particular assumptions about curriculum, so it is important that those underlying conceptions are identified and examined.

Notwithstanding the need for an appreciation of the various conceptualisations of curriculum, it is important to acknowledge, as Warren (2016) indicates, that

curriculum development has become increasingly shaped by a focus on outcomes in the quality assurance policies associated with higher education. In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the body designated by the government to safeguard standards in higher education. The QAA publishes The Quality Code (QAA, 2018a) as the key reference point for higher education providers, and this is accompanied by various supporting guidance, including the frameworks for higher education qualifications (QAA, 2014). The premise of the frameworks is that qualifications are "awarded on the basis of demonstrated achievement of outcomes (expressed in terms of knowledge, understanding and abilities)" (p.9). The pre-eminence of an outcomes-based approach to higher education qualifications is thus emphasised. Given that UK higher education providers are required to align with the expectations of the Quality Code, institutions will invariably base their formal quality assurance processes on the principles contained therein.

Modelling the factors that influence curriculum development

I turn now to the factors that impact decisions about curriculum change. I will show how these factors extend well beyond the level of the course itself, to institutional level and externally. Inevitably, given the diverse range of factors involved, there are multiple examples of models that identify the influences. I will provide an overview of some of the more widely cited models and will then present my own model which offers a structured representation of the influencing factors. I will subsequently use this as the framework for detailed examination of the factors.

Anderson and Rogan (2011) present a model that depicts curriculum development as "dynamic, interactive, open-ended and cyclical" (p68). The model (Figure 2), which is

based on the biology curriculum in South Africa, shows the high-level influencing factors of curriculum development, and the inter-related components that make up course design. The influencing factors should not be considered individually or separately, since they can each have impact on the other factors.

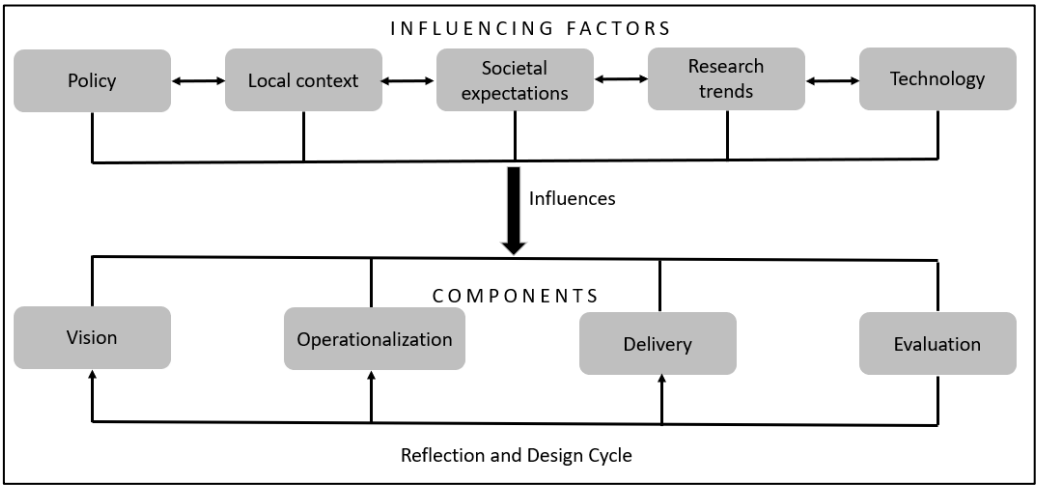

Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the relationship between influencing factors of curriculum development and the components of curriculum design. (Diagram produced by author, but based on Anderson and Rogan 2011)

Fotheringham et al. (2012) seek to provide an overview of the factors that "may effect, stimulate or be the cause of curriculum changes in higher education in Scotland" (p.1). They maintain that well-informed decision making relies on recognising and understanding both the internal and external factors. They caution against examining individual factors in isolation because there is a risk of forming a distorted view of the importance of any single factor. Instead, they emphasise the need to focus on the complex interplay between the factors. They present two graphical models to identify the various factors. The first model (Figure 3) is primarily concerned with the high-level influencing factors. It places the student at the centre because, they claim, "students are influenced by and themselves exert influence

upon all of the other factors" (p.3). They acknowledge that there is no such thing as a typical student but suggest that we tend to make assumptions about the nature of students, so they use the term 'implied student'.

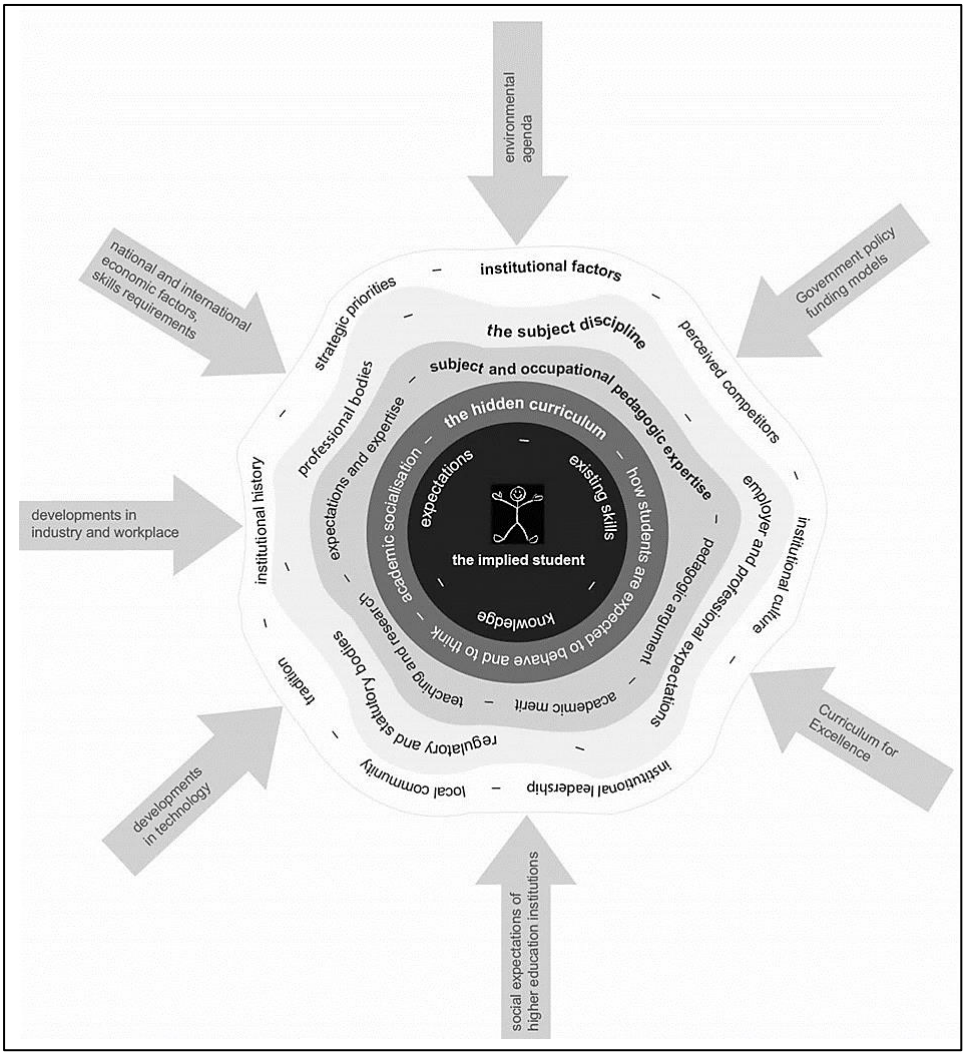

Figure 3: Factors influencing curriculum. (Source: Fotheringham et al (2012))
Reproduced under the terms of the copyright.
©The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2012

The block arrows around the perimeter of the model represent the external national and international factors that exert pressure. For the avoidance of any confusion it should be noted that 'Curriculum for Excellence' is a national initiative in Scotland aimed at school age children, so it is only relevant in the Scottish context. Within the

body of the model, a series of concentric circles or shapes represent the variety of different factors and trends that the authors perceive as affecting higher education curricula. The authors do not make any specific claims about the shape and structure of the model but it does appear to be suggestive of a certain morphology, indicating the relative significance of different factors and the relationship between them. In my view, this is somewhat misleading, as the placement of the factors relative to the student at the centre and to each other does not provide any helpful insights, other than to emphasise what they refer to as the "fluid interplay" between the factors.

In their second model (Figure 4) Fotheringham et al. (ibid) identify the curricular choices that are made at a more practical level. In Anderson and Rogan's terms, the factors included in this model relate to the curriculum design components (2011).

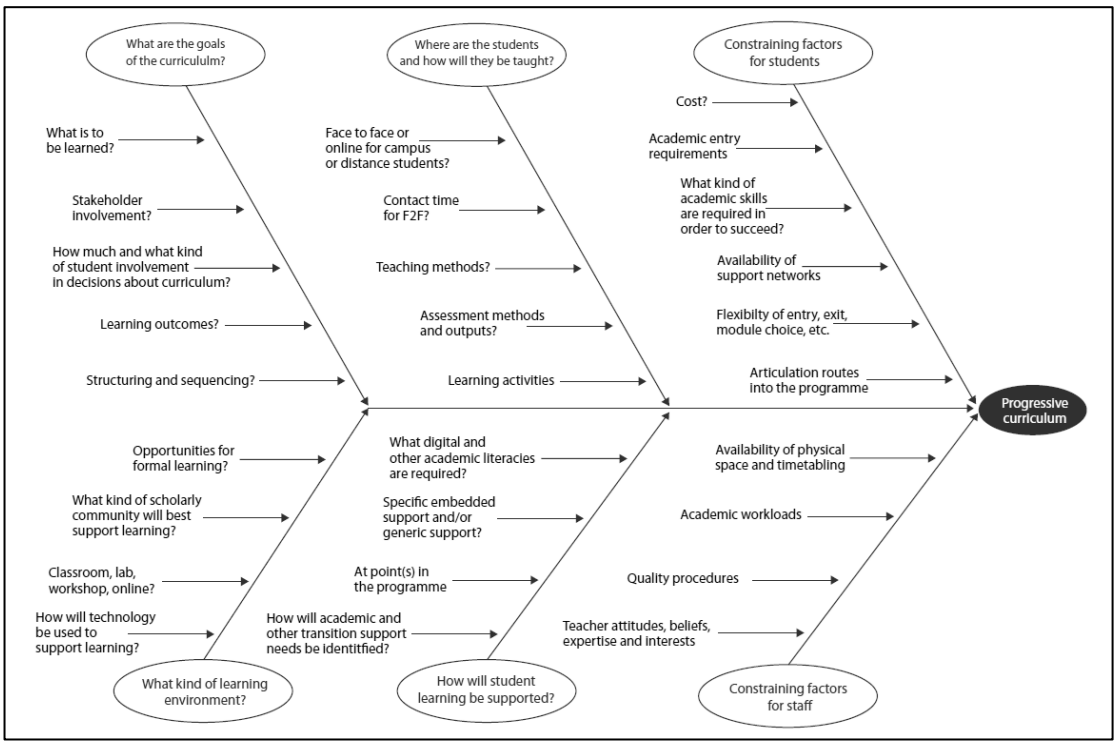

Figure 4: Curricular choices (Source: Fotheringham et al (2012))
Reproduced under the terms of the copyright
©The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2012

The model takes the form of a 'fishbone diagram' with six categories of "choices" that need to be made in determining the needs of a progressive curriculum. Each of the six categories is represented by one the main fishbones and is subdivided to produce a series of questions relating to that category. The model is useful in providing a graphical representation of the choices that need to be made but, as with the previous model, the relative position of the factors in the diagram has no particular significance.

An alternative perspective on the forces which shape curriculum decisions is provided by Roberts (2015). She conducted research amongst academics at a research-intensive university in Australia who had recently been involved in course design. She identified eight categories of influences which the academics themselves perceived as significant in reaching decisions about the curriculum. The results are shown diagrammatically in Figure 5.

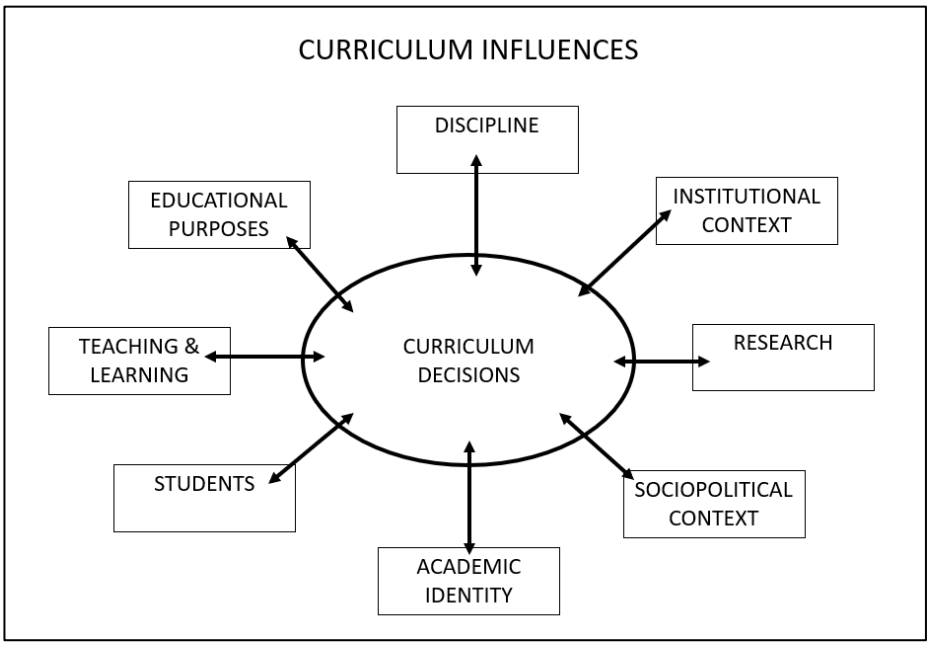

Figure 5: Academics' beliefs about curriculum influences (Diagram produced by author, but based on Roberts (2015))

Whilst the results of Roberts' study clearly align and reinforce the findings of other research in this field, it is important to recognise that this study appears to relate to academics' experiences of the design of individual units of study rather than complete courses. Although the article refers to the development of a course, it is evident that the word 'course' in this context does not mean a complete programme of study. This is important because the factors which influence curriculum development at the level of a module or unit are somewhat different to those relevant at course level.

A further model of curriculum design influences is offered by Jenkins (2009) who uses the analogy of a Ouija board to portray the curriculum as being subject to a range of forces (Figure 6).

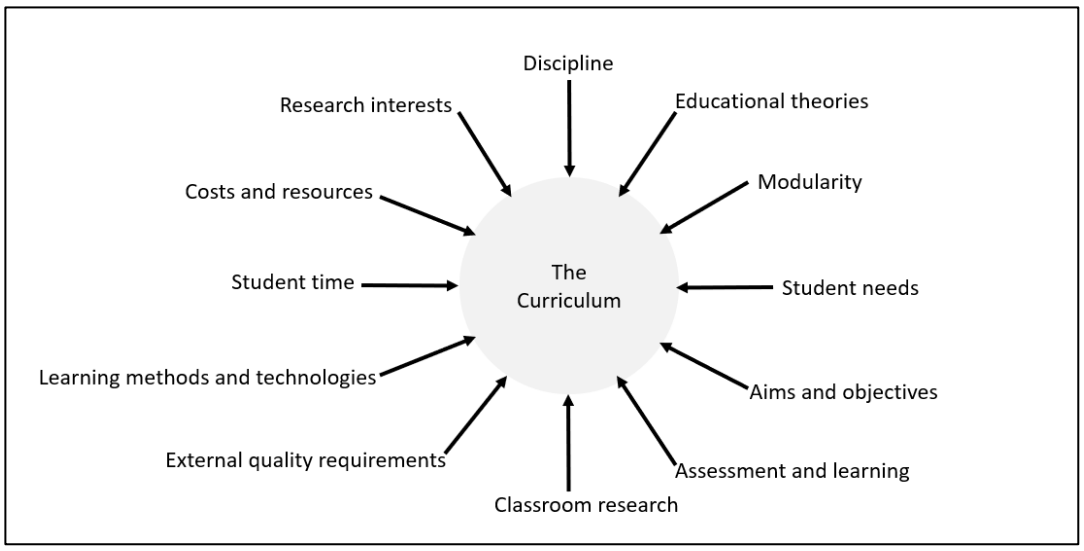

Figure 6: Curriculum design – through the analogy of a Ouija board (Diagram produced by author, but based on Jenkins (2009))

Jenkins makes the point that the curriculum is "where the worlds of individual faculty and students interact and where the departmental and institutional contexts play

key roles in determining what is learnt and how" (p.162). As such the model combines both high level influences and detailed curriculum design components.

It is apparent from the various models above, that although they have been developed from different perspectives, there is significant commonality between them. Nevertheless, it is notable that most representations do not attempt to structure the factors in a logical or coherent framework. In most cases the models are presented as a collection of loosely arranged components. I have attempted to address this point in my own interpretation of the key factors. I have categorised the various factors using my own classifications and I have used these to distinguish between high level influencing factors, and the various components that are relevant at institutional level and at the course and module level. In so doing, I have graphically illustrated a hierarchy of influences and represented the course design components as a sub-set of the broader process of curriculum development. The resultant model, shown in Figure 7 below, provides a convenient framework within which to examine the various factors in detail in the next section.

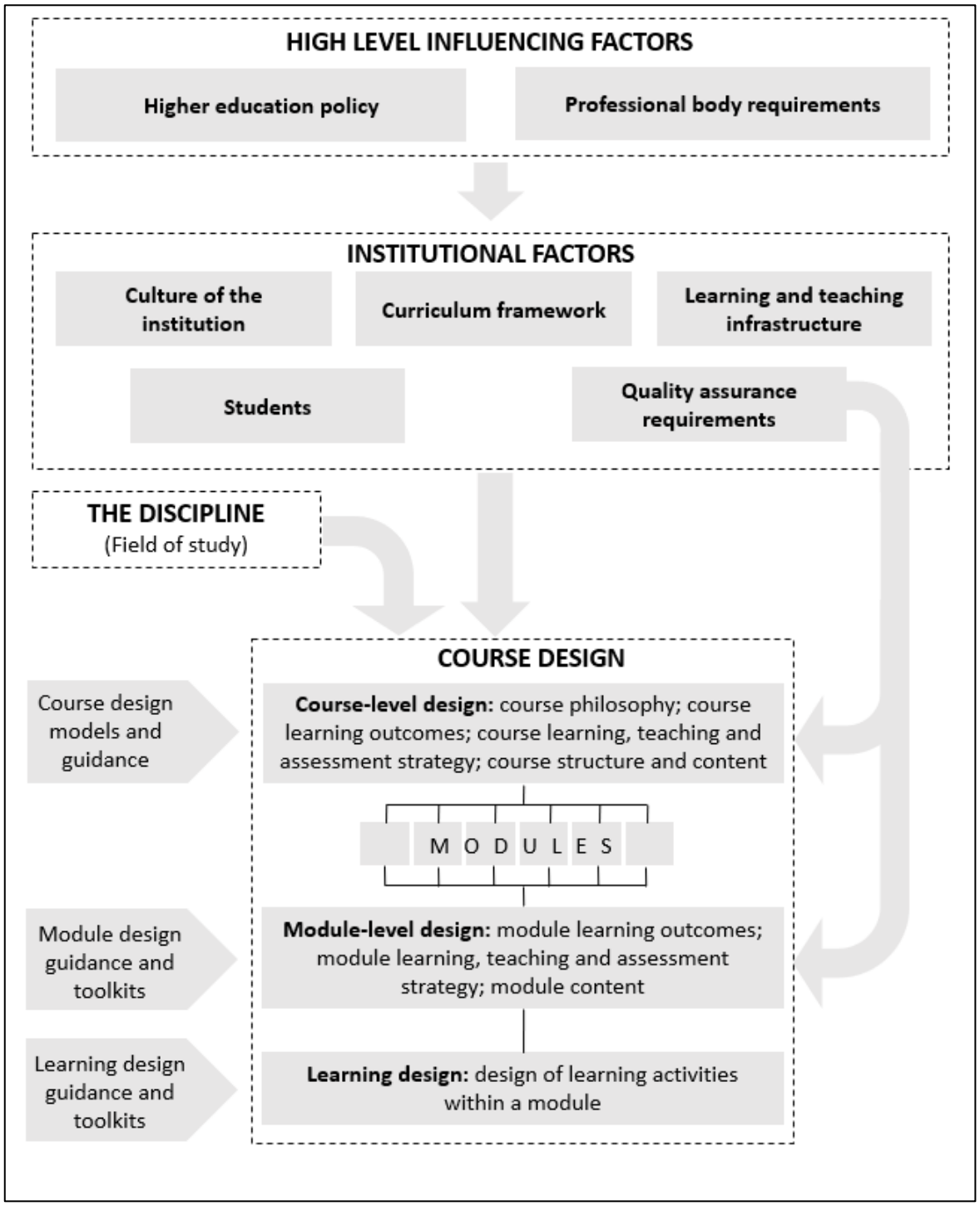

Figure 7: A model of curriculum development factors and components
(Diagram produced by the author)

HIGH LEVEL INFLUENCING FACTORS

Higher education policy

No higher education system exists in isolation. It will always be influenced by the socio-political context in which it operates, and by the policy priorities of governments. As Anderson and Rogan (2011) note, policy can have positive benefits, but if it is applied too rigidly it can be perceived as restricting academic freedom and constraining creativity in the development of the curriculum.

In England, the main bodies responsible for administering government policy on higher education are the Office for Students (OfS) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The OfS is the regulatory body for higher education. It maintains a register of higher education providers and grants degree-awarding powers to them (Boyd, 2018). The primary aim of the OfS is to ensure that higher education delivers positive outcomes for students, and that students from all backgrounds can access, succeed in and progress from higher education (OfS, 2018a).

Although the OfS retains the legal responsibility for assuring quality in higher education, it effectively outsources this function to the QAA. The QAA monitors and advises on standards and quality in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and through its Quality Code (QAA, 2018a) it sets out the expectations of higher education providers. Whilst it clearly has a role in ensuring the accountability of higher education providers, it also seeks to promote the enhancement of quality. The QAA is sometimes criticised for focusing too much on the former at the expense of the latter (Brady and Bates, 2016).

The implementation of national policy has a significant impact on universities' approaches to curriculum development. The way in which national governments perceive the purpose of higher education, the way it is funded, and how it is evaluated will all affect, directly or indirectly, how universities respond to the challenges of the curriculum. In common with many other countries, the role of higher education in the UK is widely perceived in terms of its contribution to economic growth and the development of graduates with the attributes required in the workplace. This translates into policy guidance that expects providers to deliver outcomes for all students that are recognised and valued by employers (OfS, 2018a).

The trend for a curriculum oriented towards employment has been apparent for several decades. For example, Saunders and Machell (2000) referred to the drift to a more explicit link between what students learn and what they might do in the workplace. Whilst the increased focus on employability is broadly accepted in higher education, it has always been a contentious issue in the sector. Thirty years ago, Barnett (1990) bemoaned the emphasis on the acquisition of skills and competences and argued that this may be at the expense of the more traditional higher education values. More recently, Collini (2016) highlighted the tensions and inconsistencies present in a neoliberal conception of higher education in which "universities are coming to be reshaped as centres of applied expertise and vocational training that are subordinate to a society's 'economic strategy'" (online). Such diverse views on the purpose of higher education will inevitably influence the curriculum development process, since different members of a course team may hold values which lean towards one view or another, and this can be a source of tension.

A significant shift in the funding arrangements for higher education in England and Wales has been brought about by the introduction and subsequent increases in student tuition fees. This in turn has led to changes in students' attitudes towards higher education providers, and there is evidence that students are increasingly demanding better 'value for money'. For example, one study across a range of UK higher education institutions found that a "consumerist ethos emerged throughout students' expectations and perceptions" (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p.7). Students are effectively encouraged to exercise their choice as consumers in a highly competitive market for higher education courses. As Staddon and Standish (2012) note, a significant outcome of this is the increased emphasis on the quality of the student experience, and this is a significant factor in the curriculum development process.

In this marketised environment, considerable attention is given to the metrics that are used as the basis for evaluating and comparing different courses and institutions. In the UK, the primary instrument for providing such metrics has been the National Student Survey (NSS) which, as Klemenčič and Chirikov (2015) note, is essentially a survey of student satisfaction. The survey assesses the opinions of final year undergraduate degree students at all higher education institutions in the UK on the quality of their degree programmes. The NSS is administered via an online questionnaire in which students respond to a series of statements covering various aspects of their experience during their course. As Richardson (2013) notes, the results of the survey become an "influential and widely cited source of information about the experience of students in higher education" (p.78). Richardson cites

several published accounts of how the NSS results have prompted institutions to take action in response to the survey. Examples include initiatives aimed at addressing shortcomings in assessment and feedback, and there is evidence of changes in teachers' behaviour and changes in institutional policies (Richardson, 2013).

The National Student Survey is one of the metrics that contributes to the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) which is overseen by the OfS and purports to assess excellence in teaching in higher education (OfS, 2018b). The TEF bases its assessment on data from the NSS, together with data relating to student retention and graduate employment. Each institution taking part in the TEF is awarded one of three levels, namely Gold, Silver or Bronze.

In a report produced for the Universities and Colleges Union (O'Leary et al., 2019) there is evidence of institutions introducing curriculum transformation initiatives, with the specific objective of securing Gold or Silver TEF awards. Typically, these initiatives are presented as a means of improving graduate employability or enhancing the student experience, but they are often perceived by academic staff as attempts by management to standardise policies, procedures and practices in relation to both the curriculum and pedagogy.

The OfS also promotes fair access to higher education and equal opportunities, and this requires consideration of an inclusive curriculum. Historically, the concept of inclusivity in education tended to be associated with the additional support that educational institutions provided for students with 'special educational needs' (Hockings, 2010). In particular, the focus was often on compliance with legal

requirements for equality by accommodating the special needs of students with physical or sensory impairments through remedial interventions. Such approaches are now widely seen as reacting to particular students' 'deficits' (Morgan and Houghton, 2011), and it is suggested that they may actually perpetuate disadvantage (May and Bridger, 2010).

Professional bodies

A further significant external influence comes in the form of the power exercised by professional bodies. Such bodies are formed when occupational groups organise themselves to promote their own status and gain some control over their domain of practice (Adler et al., 2008). Professional bodies take responsibility for defining a profession's knowledge base and certifying professional competence. Their power is formalised in the UK through the award of royal charters by the Privy Council, which effectively delegates state power to these institutions (Burrage, 1994). Historically, entry to a profession required the successful completion of examinations set and administered by such professional institutions but, as Eraut (1994) notes, over time there was a shift away from qualifying examinations administered by professional bodies, towards accredited degree courses provided by higher education institutions. The established professions thus defined the boundaries of their own knowledge base and this became institutionalised in the form of a curriculum taught within a higher education institution (Beck and Young, 2005).

The professional accreditation process effectively imposes a set of 'rules' on the curriculum design process. As de Paor (2016) notes, the process constitutes a form of external evaluation which typically lays down standards and expectations in respect

of the curriculum and the teaching, learning and assessment strategy. Universities value professional accreditation, as it represents a formal stamp of approval from a professional body. For many professions, an accredited degree is a prerequisite for entry, and in a competitive higher education sector, accreditation will be a selling point for universities. Indeed, as Burrage (1994) notes, failure to secure accreditation may mean that courses are not viable. Inevitably therefore, the accreditation process will influence curriculum design, since course teams will seek to ensure that the content of the course will be acceptable to the accrediting body.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Having identified the main high-level influencing factors, I will now consider the institutional level. Firstly, I will highlight the significance of institutional culture in translating the high-level factors at local level, and then demonstrate how those factors might be articulated via a curriculum framework. The culture and curriculum framework are then combined with various other local factors to create an institutional context for course design.

The culture of the institution

Universities in the UK typically publish statements that describe their mission, values and overall strategy. Such statements are public pronouncements of a university's purpose, ambitions and values (Cortés-Sánchez, 2017) that should provide some strategic direction to the activities of the institution. It is questionable whether the publicly stated mission and values of an institution are accurately reflected in the day-to-day operation of the organisation. In a marketised higher education system the priorities of management are often driven by imperatives such as recruitment

targets, research outputs, NSS results, TEF ratings and so on. Furthermore, a study in the US by Stark (2000) that investigated the underlying assumptions of faculty members planning introductory-level college courses found that less than ten percent of them felt that the institutional mission affected their educational beliefs. Nevertheless, such documents must be taken into account given that curriculum development is acknowledged as a business process that seeks to align a university's portfolio of courses to its mission (Ferrell, 2011).

The organisational culture of universities has changed considerably in recent decades. Traditionally, universities were seen as "communities of scholars researching and teaching in collegial ways" (Deem, 1998). Prior to 1992, higher education in the UK was split between universities and polytechnics - the so-called binary divide. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 removed this divide and brought both types of institution into a single sector. As higher education expanded, the management of universities became increasingly professionalised. Deem (ibid.) describes the emergence of a "new managerialism" in this period, whereby universities increasingly adopted the management practices that had hitherto only been associated with business. Lynch (2015) highlights the close alignment between this new managerialism and the marketisation of higher education, describing it as a form of governance that seeks to inculcate market values and practices. The result is that universities are held to account through ranking and auditing, and they respond by focusing on the things that are measured. Deem and Baird (2019) suggest that so much attention is paid to such accountability measures, that there is a lack of critical thinking about measures that could lead to genuine improvements.

As senior managers within universities push for improvements in rankings, middle managers come under pressure to improve performance. The use of workload models has become common, whereby academic staff are given hours allocations for various activities, including student-facing activities such as teaching, and other activities such as research and scholarly activity (Graham, 2016). According to Kenny (2018) there are competing demands on academic time as teaching and administrative workloads increase alongside pressure to deliver research outputs. Cooper (2017) raises serious concerns about the shortage of time available to complete the tasks necessary for curriculum implementation and indicates that workload models underestimate the demands. Kenny (2017) notes that there is a widespread perception that the performativity measures used in many universities attach greater worth to research than to other activities. This view is reinforced by Bajada et al. (2019) who indicate that curriculum development work is perceived by academics to be relatively unrewarded, and this acts as a disincentive, particularly when academics' natural enthusiasm may be for research in their field rather than teaching and curriculum activities. Thus, as Cooper (2017) points out, career-minded academic staff may well prioritise research outputs over curriculum-related activities. The issue can be more pronounced in older universities, which are generally regarded as being more research-intensive than the former polytechnics and modern universities (Eurydice, 2019).

Another way in which a research-driven culture within a university can influence curriculum development is by promoting research as the basis for the design of the curriculum. This does not simply refer to the content of a course being informed by

research outputs, but to embedding the practice of research within the course. An example of this is provided by Fung (2017), who describes the so-called Connected Curriculum framework at University College London, a research-intensive university. The objective of the framework is to promote a curriculum in which learning takes place through research and enquiry by breaking down the divisions between the practices of research and teaching.

Curriculum frameworks

The Connected Curriculum is a good example of a mechanism that translates the high-level influencing factors, via the institutional culture, into a curriculum framework for the institution. The scholarly literature relating specifically to the concept of curriculum frameworks is relatively scarce, though there is some literature that covers the various components that contribute to such a framework. Coverage of curriculum frameworks can be found in grey literature, particularly within academic blog posts, and examples of such frameworks are available on many university websites. I will refer to such sources but will reinforce this with references from more formal literature.

I have already considered the impact that a changing higher education landscape has on curriculum development, particularly in terms of marketisation and other contemporary higher education issues. Longcroft and Cross (2020) maintain that many universities in the UK have responded to this changing landscape by attempting to define an institutional distinctiveness. They will often do this by articulating a framework or model within which curriculum design takes place. Such

curriculum frameworks may seek to provide a degree of consistency across an institution, and to promote the particular strengths of an institution.

A review of a small selection of English university curriculum frameworks available on university websites (University of Reading, 2017; Anglia Ruskin University, 2018; University of Portsmouth, 2019; University of Sunderland, n.d.) identifies that there is a good deal of commonality amongst the components found therein. There are regular references to issues such as employability, student engagement and inclusivity. In addition, it is common to find references to a curriculum that is founded on research and inquiry.

Curriculum frameworks generally incorporate a set of graduate attributes, which are broadly defined by Advance HE (2018) as statements that "detail the qualities and skills that the provider believes graduates should develop through the course of their study and engagement in student life" (online). They will differ from one institution to another but typically they will refer to various skills, values and attitudes that are generic rather than subject-specific. Hill et al. (2016) identify the most common graduate attributes as skills covering critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, communication and research, together with information and digital literacies, self-awareness, creativity, and social responsibility. Institutional graduate attributes can be used as a starting point in the course design process, especially in the development of course aims and learning outcomes. O'Neill (2015) highlights the role of graduate attributes in achieving a coherent curriculum.

Another common component of a curriculum framework is a set of pedagogical principles that underpin the development of courses. Again, these are likely to be generic rather than subject-specific and will often be articulated in a document such as a learning and teaching strategy. Such documents have been commonplace in English universities since the late 1990s (Sabri, 2010) and over subsequent decades became, as Gibbs (2013) notes, "much more comprehensive, coherent and sophisticated" (p.8). Much like graduate attributes, there is considerable commonality amongst institutional learning and teaching strategies, with themes typically including resources, diversity, employability, research and innovation (Clegg and Smith, 2010). Healey et al. (2010) describe the development of a learning and teaching strategy in which students were centrally engaged. The strategy presents a set of principles to inform learning, teaching and assessment across the university, including learner empowerment, active engagement, learning communities, learning for sustainable development, and learning for equality, diversity and intercultural understanding. It will be evident that the themes covered by learning and teaching strategies overlap considerably with those of graduate attributes and indeed other components of a curriculum framework, but there is a clear intention that such strategies will influence course design.

Learning and teaching infrastructure

The priority attached to learning and teaching, the way learning and teaching is led, and how it is supported will all have implications for curriculum-related activities. Cooper (2017) makes the point that institutional support is critical to successful

curriculum change. This requires recognition of the complexity of the task, leadership, adequate staffing and staff development.

The intensification of academic life, along with the managerialism and the loss of collegiality have contributed to what Knight and Trowler (2000) refer to as an "inhospitable environment for good teaching and learning" (p.71). The importance attached to curriculum design and development within a higher education institution is likely to correlate with the relative status of learning and teaching as compared to other activities such as research and knowledge exchange, and this in turn may be related to the nature of the leadership provided (Gibbs et al., 2008).

A key responsibility of those charged with the leadership and management of learning and teaching is to promote a culture in which learning and teaching are valued (Marshall et al., 2011). Thus, those institutions where learning and teaching are prioritised are likely to support the development of staff and provide an infrastructure that facilitates effective curriculum development. Knight and Trowler (2000) argue that the focus for creating a culture conducive to good teaching and learning must lie at the level of the department and the sub-units, including course teams, within the department.

To gain an insight into the values and attitudes that are present within departments or course teams, Trowler (2005) suggests that we should look to the teaching and learning regimes (TLRs) that exist. TLRs incorporate various "rules, assumptions, practices and relationships related to teaching and learning" (Trowler and Cooper, 2002, p.222) and therefore provide clues as to how open a course team will be to

new ideas and innovations when developing a new course or reviewing an existing course. Examples of the factors that contribute to TLRs may include: routinised behaviours, known as recurrent practices; tacit assumptions that prevail within teams, for example relating to pedagogical approaches or ideologies; and the way in which power is transmitted and applied (Trowler, 2005). With regard to power, this does not just refer to formal power such as that exerted by a Head of Department, but also the informal power that lies in the hands of particular individuals who may not have management authority over others. This might be evident in the influence of long-standing members of staff who wield significant power in more subtle ways by virtue of their reputation or personality.

The role of course leaders in the leadership of learning and teaching is particularly interesting because, as Milburn (2010) points out, they typically do not have any line management authority over colleagues in the course team. They therefore have to "effect change by influencing, coordinating and acting as a good role model, rather than relying on managerial 'clout'" (p.88). Despite this, it is acknowledged (Murphy and Curtis, 2013) that the role is significant for the student experience because of its impact on student support, pastoral care, pedagogy and curriculum design. Course leaders undoubtedly play a crucial role in "capturing the imagination of those tasked with writing and implementing the curriculum" and translating that into an effective experience for students (Milburn, 2010, p.88).

Beetham (2009) notes that curriculum development involves a wide range of stakeholders in addition to the course team and senior academic staff. Amongst these, the personnel involved in educational development and quality assurance

have a particularly significant role. I will address quality assurance in more detail in a later section, but I would like to briefly highlight the role of educational developers here.

The centrality of educational developers to the curriculum design and development process arises because the focus of the educational developer's role is to enhance learning and teaching practices within an institution. Gibbs (2013) indicates that the professional development of teachers is one of several key responsibilities of educational developers, and Gosling (2009) refers to their role in encouraging innovation in teaching and learning.

Research that focuses specifically on the role of educational developers in supporting course teams in curriculum development is quite scarce. O'Neill (2010) presents an interesting study of the practices of educational developers in working with course teams during the initial curriculum revision process. A key aspect of the role is what she refers to as "a dialogic approach by the educational developers" (p.65). This involves listening to and questioning the academic staff involved to establish why they want to change the curriculum, what they are trying to achieve, and what they want their students to gain from the curriculum. As to the detailed design of a course, it was found that, in general, educational developers were not wedded to a particular approach and were flexible and open to the use of different approaches in different contexts. In later work, O'Neill and her colleagues propose that educational developers need to assist programme teams in creating a curriculum philosophy and raise awareness of different models of curriculum sequencing (O'Neill et al., 2013). What O'Neill's work highlights is that educational developers have the potential to

exert significant influence over the curriculum development process if course teams choose to avail themselves of the support available. Indeed, as Healey et al. (2013) indicate, when educational developers are involved, they provide a supportive, non-judgemental, independent viewpoint which challenges course teams to think differently about the design of their courses.

Course teams may take the opportunity provided by a new course design or a course review to embrace new modes of delivery, whether blended or fully online. Blended learning may be defined as the combination of face-to-face and technology-mediated instruction and has become so commonplace that it may even be considered 'the new normal' (Porter et al., 2014). It is critical that course teams and institutions recognise the broader issues involved in a decision to adopt blended learning modes more widely. A survey by the UK's Universities and Colleges Information Systems Associations in 2018 found that despite considerable investment in technology, there was little evidence of major changes in the way technology is being used to support learning, teaching and assessment. In most cases, a so-called blended learning approach focused predominantly on providing digital copies of lecture notes and supplementary resources, rather than supporting active, open or fully online modes (UCISA, 2018). Interestingly, at the time of writing (2020), the higher education sector globally has had to respond to the restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this has led to a major shift to online learning. This has been referred to (Salmon, 2020) as the pivot point for online learning, at which universities will be finally forced to rethink how they can support students' learning in an online environment.

Students

As noted earlier, the OfS requires that higher education providers design their courses to provide students with opportunities to succeed. It is broadly acknowledged that successful students tend to be more engaged with their studies (Kahu and Nelson, 2018) so the concept of student engagement has "become ubiquitous in mainstream discourses across the sector" (Gourlay, 2017, p.24).

One manifestation of the higher education sector's concern for student engagement is the trend to promote arrangements whereby staff and students work jointly in a partnership. Typically, such arrangements involve projects concerned with learning and teaching issues, but can also include assessment, subject-based research, institutional governance, quality assurance, community engagement and extra-curricular activities (Healey et. al., 2014). Most notably in the current context, partnership arrangements may also be established in relation to curriculum development. Bovill et al. (2009) describe the findings of a project that investigated the extent to which students actively participate in curriculum design. They found numerous examples of participation, varying from low-level involvement such as students providing feedback on courses, through to students contributing to the writing of course materials.

One of the main benefits of student participation was found to be a more personalised learning experience, but there were concerns amongst academic staff that students may not have the expertise required to plan a curriculum (Bovill et.al., 2009). In later work, Bovill et al. (2016) identified similar challenges when students were given a role in the design of learning, teaching and assessment. They note that

most staff are accustomed to being solely responsible for planning their teaching practice, and ceding any responsibility for this to students can be perceived as entailing both personal and professional risk. Nevertheless, there are examples where academic staff have successfully engaged students in curriculum design, resulting in modifications to the structure and delivery of the curriculum. For example, Brooman et al. (2015) describe how they used student focus groups to review an undergraduate module on a law degree, and this resulted in revisions to both the module material and the approaches used in the delivery of the module.

Quality assurance requirements

The significance of quality assurance has already been referred to as one of the components of the regulatory regime within which the whole higher education sector must operate. In particular, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) plays a key role in establishing the quality expectations of all higher education providers through its Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2018a). As well as being one of the high level influencing factors, quality assurance is also significant at institutional level. As Ferrell (2011) notes, the processes associated with curriculum development at institutional level are generally well-established and rigorous, and have a strong focus on quality assurance. Williams (2016) suggests that quality assurance is primarily concerned with ensuring that higher education reaches stated standards.

Typically, within a university, there will be detailed procedures for the planning, approval and review of courses (Ellis, 2018). This generally means that the quality assurance system will set out very specific procedures for validating new courses and reviewing existing courses. The procedures will typically cover the timescales, the

documentation required, the roles and responsibilities of the various internal and external parties involved, and the sequence of events required to approve a course for delivery.

The Quality Code (QAA, 2018a) and its associated advice and guidance (QAA, 2018b) sets specific expectations in relation to such procedures. There is a strong emphasis in the code on the need for a high-quality academic experience, and yet the literature regularly highlights a tension between quality assurance requirements and effective curriculum development. Ferrell (2011) notes that innovation can be inhibited by the bureaucracy associated with quality assurance and enhancement, whilst Cooper (2017) sees university processes and practices as a barrier to implementing change. In a report concerned with institutional approaches to curriculum design, Beetham (2009) identifies a wide range of concerns raised by academics about the constraining effect that quality assurance requirements can have on the process. Specific concerns included a disproportionate focus on documentation rather than academic debate, a perceived expectation that documents are written for the approval panel rather than other stakeholders, and perceptions of excessive bureaucracy and a lack of flexibility (Beetham, 2009).

Brady and Bates (2016) are stinging in their criticisms of the quality assurance systems at one English university which they claim have evolved from a “lightly managed process” to “more intrusive forms of micro-management” (p.156). They describe how curriculum development is inhibited by managerial structures and a highly regulated approach. Whilst the language presented in quality assurance documentation conveys a neutral or functionalist stance, they claim that there are

implicit messages that signal "certain values and assumptions concerning power relations" (p.161). In their view this results in academics dissociating themselves from the process and being less likely to experiment with different approaches to learning and teaching (Brady and Bates, 2016). This chimes with the view expressed by Ziegenfuss and Lawler (2008), who suggest that a reliance on institutional standards to guide decision-making in the course design process can limit the extent to which academic staff embrace change in the process.

THE DISCIPLINE

Most higher education courses are built around a subject so it is inevitable that the course team's conception of a discipline will provide the basis of what is to be taught. Jenkins (2009) noted that many of his academic colleagues were motivated by "the academic importance of *what* they taught" (p.159) rather than seeing the content of a course is merely a vehicle for students' intellectual growth. For many academic staff it is their passion for the subject that has brought them into academia in the first place. As Ziegenfuss and Lawler (2008) indicate, the majority of lecturers are trained first and foremost as disciplinary experts rather than teachers. In a study based on interviews with influential individuals in the UK higher education policy sector, Sabri (2010) identified a widespread perception that academics focus on their discipline to the exclusion of the student.

The influence of the discipline on curriculum development is significant. A survey by Binns (2015) of academic staff found that the biggest single influence on module design was their own subject area. Toohey (1999) notes that, traditionally, the design of most higher education courses has followed the structure of knowledge in the

discipline, whereby courses are divided into units or modules, which in turn are broken down into topics based around important concepts. This can lead to a disproportionate focus at module-level and result in a fragmented curriculum that lacks coherence and seems more like a collection of individual modules (O'Neill, 2015).

Much of the literature on disciplines relates to the notion of academic identity. Of particular note is Becher's (1989) work on academic tribes and territories, updated by Becher and Trowler (2001). The term 'tribes' refers to groups of academics from particular disciplines that have recognisable structures and customs, whilst 'territories' refers to the areas of the map of knowledge that the tribes occupy (Tight, 2015). Academic identity can provide clues as to how academics from different disciplines may approach certain processes. As Knight and Trowler (2000) point out, the extent to which academics identify with their discipline can outweigh their allegiance to their institution.

The notion of tribes and territories tends to be associated with traditional academic subjects. As Tight (2015) points out, in a modern mass higher education system universities increasingly offer courses in more vocational and professional subject areas. Many such courses tend to lack what Muller (2009) refers to as a "foundational disciplinary core" (p.214). This can be particularly the case with professionally-based courses where the 'discipline' is related to professional practice rather than intrinsic knowledge structures (Beck and Young, 2005). In such disciplines, academic staff may derive their professional identity from the profession itself and be more practice-driven than academically-driven (Harman, 1989). This will

also have an impact on the way in which courses are designed and delivered, since staff with a professional background may tend towards practice-focused knowledge (Eraut, 2009).

COURSE DESIGN

The high-level influencing factors, the institutional factors and the role of the discipline effectively provide the context within which the detailed design of the course takes place. Course design can be considered at three levels, namely course-level design, module-level design, and learning design. The distinction between the three levels can be somewhat confusing and it is therefore appropriate to explain what I mean by each level.

When I refer to course-level design I mean the decisions that need to be taken at the level of a complete course of study. One of the reasons for confusion here is that different terminology may be used in different countries. I use the word 'course' in the way it is used in the UK, where it typically refers to an entire programme of study, made up of individual modules or units (JISC/HESA, 2011). Each university may adopt its own terminology, but the words 'course' and 'programme' are often used interchangeably in the UK. In some cases, a programme may refer to a group of parallel courses in a related field, whereas a course specifically refers to a defined degree award. It is important to contrast the use of the word 'course' in the USA, where it typically refers to a unit of study, such that a degree programme (program) will consist of a specific number of courses (Narayan, 2011).

The second level of design is concerned with decisions made at module-level. I use the word 'module' to refer to the self-contained portions of study within a course. Again, there are differences between institutions, with some universities adopting the alternative term 'unit'. In the English higher education system, undergraduate honours courses usually carry an overall credit value of 360 UK credits. Typically, this is divided into 120 credits at each of three levels, representing the three years of a full-time course. The 120 credits are gained by completing modules, each of which have an individual credit value. It is up to universities to determine the value of individual modules within a course, but most universities have modular frameworks based around standard credit values such as 15 credits or 20 credits per module, or multiples thereof. Accordingly, the design or re-design of any degree course will require consideration of numerous individual modules.

The third level of design is concerned with design of learning activities within a module. This is sometimes referred to as 'learning design' though the notion of learning design is itself somewhat confusing and, as Conole (2013) points out, has been used in various ways. There has been increased interest in learning design since the 1990s, particularly related to the growth of online and blended approaches to learning. Despite its strong association with technology-mediated learning, I am using the term to refer simply to the design of the activities that students will undertake as part of their learning (Rienties and Toetenel, 2016). Although I refer to it here, it should be noted that learning design often occurs as a separate activity after the course design has been completed.

Underlying the process of course design is the implicit need to consider learning outcomes. This is certainly the case at course-level and module-level where the literature widely points to an expectation that design must start with consideration of what students will be expected to learn. There are also strong arguments in favour of the use of learning outcomes in relation to individual teaching events (Hussey and Smith, 2008). It is therefore appropriate to examine the underlying principle of outcomes-based course design before looking in detail at course design processes.

Outcomes-based course design

I noted earlier in this chapter that, despite numerous arguments against the product model of the curriculum, an outcomes-based approach to course design is the norm in the UK, not least because such an approach underpins the UK's qualifications frameworks (QAA, 2018b). The key underlying principle in an outcomes-based approach is that course design must start with a consideration of the desired outcomes. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) refer to this approach as "backward design", and they use this term deliberately to counteract a common perception amongst teachers that the design of a curriculum starts with the content they will teach (inputs), rather than what the students will learn (outputs).

A learning outcome is defined in terms of what students are expected to know or understand, or what they should be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning (Gosling and Moon, 2002). Learning outcomes lie at the heart of one of the most widely cited course design concepts, known as constructive alignment. This was originally presented by Biggs (1996) and is based on constructivist learning theory and on the idea that assessment tasks and learning activities should be aligned with

intended learning outcomes (Biggs and Tang, 2011). In the Biggs and Tang model it is proposed that learning outcomes should identify what the student can perform after a period of learning that they could not do previously. The outcomes should specify not just what is to be learned, but what the learner should be able to do with that knowledge.

In the USA, where the term 'constructive alignment' may not be so widely used, the same basic principle is widely adopted. Fink's (2003) model of integrated course design shown in Figure 8 clearly demonstrates the relationship between the same essential components as the constructive alignment model.

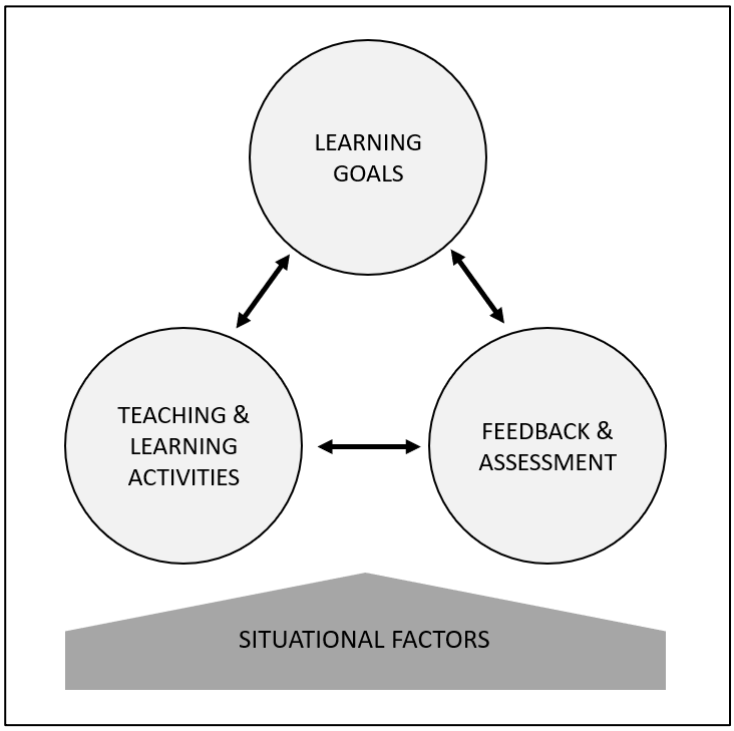

Figure 8: Model of integrated course design (Diagram by author but based on Fink, (2003))

Fink refers to learning goals rather than learning outcomes, and these are identified first. Integrated within the model is a consideration of how students will achieve the learning goals through teaching and learning activities, and how evidence will be provided to demonstrate the achievement of the learning goals through feedback

and assessment. The model is underpinned by a consideration of situational factors such as the nature of the subject and the nature of the students (Fink, 2003).

Notwithstanding the predominance of learning outcomes and constructive alignment, it is important to acknowledge that there is a significant body of literature that questions these principles. Knight (2001) argues that complex learning cannot be reduced to precise statements, whilst Erikson and Erikson (2019) are critical of the use of learning outcomes for administrative goals, and question whether learning outcomes are compatible with the development of critical thinking ability. Fanghanel (2011) acknowledges that learning outcomes can introduce transparency in the relationship between students and teachers but notes that the curriculum is always more open than a set of learning outcomes would suggest. Fung (2017) acknowledges the "internal logic" (p.18) of constructive alignment, but also notes its limitations and argues against a curriculum based on narrow objectives. Tam (2014) highlights the potential constraining effect of a curriculum in which the components are so tightly specified that there is no room for serendipitous learning. At the heart of many of these arguments are the different conceptions of curriculum which I examined earlier in this chapter. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the fundamental principles of constructive alignment and learning outcomes seem to have an almost canonical status in course design models. My purpose in presenting the arguments and the variety in interpretations is simply to highlight the potential morass that course teams encounter when they embark on the development of a new course or the review of an existing course.

The detailed process of course design

Guidance on course design is typically presented in the form of a model that maps the activities involved and provides prompts for curriculum choices. An extensive range of such models exist, and it would be impractical to provide an exhaustive review of every source. The following review is therefore based on a representative sample of some of the most widely cited models.

The model presented by Toohey (1999) (Figure 9) shows the course design process mapped in linear form, and suggests a sequential, step-by-step process.

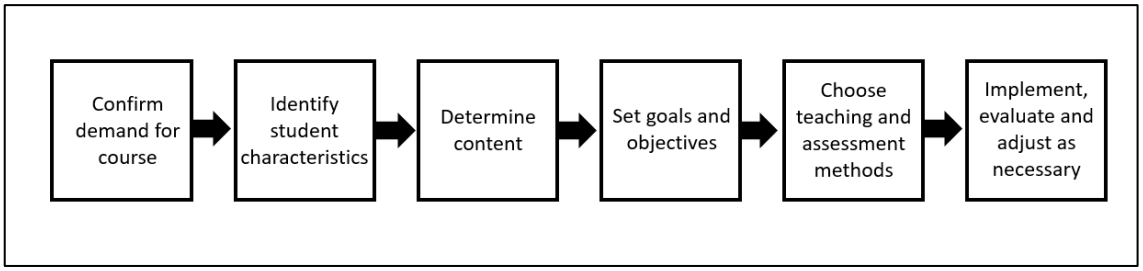

Figure 9: A map of the course design process (Diagram produced by author, but based on Toohey, 1999)

The model appears to show content being determined prior to the setting of goals, thus implying a focus on what Wiggins and McTighe (2005) refer to as inputs rather than outputs. Thus, one might question whether this model actually conforms to an outcomes-based approach. Nevertheless, Toohey (ibid., p.25) does recognise that the central question to be answered in the course design process is "What is most important for these students to know and what might be the best ways for them to learn it?". Furthermore, her detailed coverage of the course design process is far more comprehensive than the model in Figure 9 would suggest and considers in

some detail the development of a framework, the values that underpin the course, the structure of the course, assessment and so on.

The idea of a framework to underpin the curriculum is common in course design models, either explicitly or implicitly. Such frameworks often incorporate graduate attributes, pedagogical principles and various institutional strategies and policies relating to such issues as employability, inclusivity, research-based education and so on. Graduate attributes are sometimes viewed as a starting point for design because they represent a generic set of outcomes at institutional level which are translated into a course-level context at course level (Biggs and Tang, 2011). It should then be possible, as Stefani (2008) indicates, to track the claims made at institutional level through to course- and module-level learning outcomes.

Reference to graduate attributes can also be found in O'Neill's (2015) model (Figure 10) which presents curriculum design as a "circular and dynamic" process (p.5) in which the components influence each other. The representation is intended to indicate a degree of sequencing, but the model accepts that the stages need not necessarily be strictly sequential (ibid.).

O'Neill's guidance recognises that curriculum design takes place within various disciplinary, institutional, national and international contexts. There is consideration of the educational philosophy that underpins any course, and it is proposed that course teams should articulate a vision and a set of values before embarking on the detailed design. Whilst the guidance is clearly founded on an outcomes-based approach, it acknowledges the existence of a variety of curriculum models. In

particular, it recognises that most courses incorporate elements of both a product model and a process model (p.26).

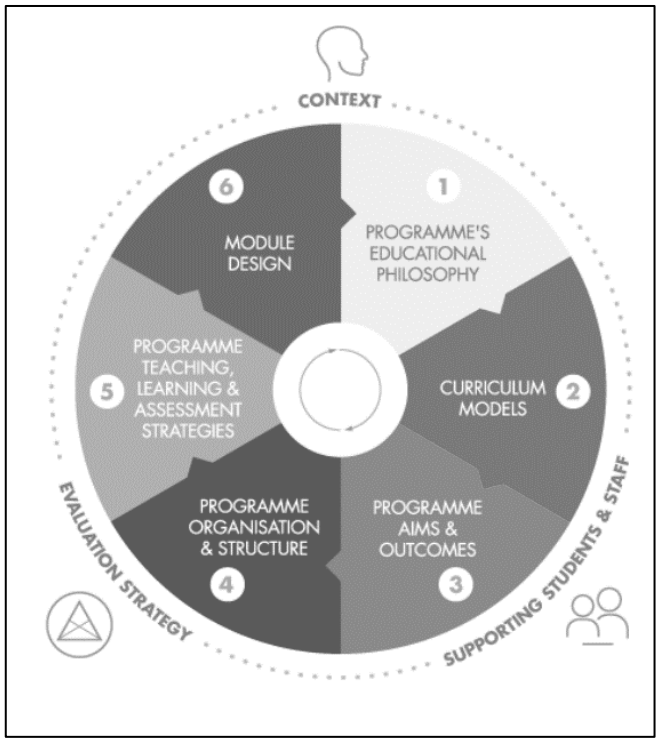

Figure 10: Curriculum Design Process (O'Neill, 2015)

Course (programme) level outcomes are established before considering the structure of a course in terms of its content, scope and sequencing. This leads to consideration of learning, teaching and assessment strategies at course level which can be translated into specific approaches to be adopted at module level.

Another model that follows a broadly similar sequence is the CAIeRO framework developed at the University of Northampton. The acronym stands for 'Creating Aligned Interactive educational Resource Opportunities' (Usher, MacNeill and Creanor, 2018), and the framework is founded on the principle of active blended learning. Usher (2014) describes how CAIeRO workshops are used at programme (course) level to enable the course team to consider the core values and purpose of the course. This leads to the development of a blueprint for the course which

identifies the course learning outcomes. From the course learning outcomes, the sequencing of different elements of knowledge and skills is set out, the structure of the course is derived, and assessment is mapped across the course.

Whilst the models presented thus far have covered the overall process of course design, other models are focused more specifically at module level. It is generally acknowledged that module-level design requires the prior establishment of course learning outcomes, course learning, teaching and assessment strategies, and course structure and content. In theory, the process involved should be the same for every module in the course, though often there will be some variation according to the preferences of individual module leaders.

There is some consistency in the literature and guidance about the approach to designing individual modules, though inevitably there are numerous design models that each offer a particular emphasis, especially in relation to modules which are to be delivered partly or wholly online. A standard overall approach is set out by Moon (2002) and is shown in Figure 11 below. Moon's map of the process shows that the course (programme) level outcomes (or descriptors as she refers to them) are taken as a starting point, and these inform the detailed design of the module. A module aim is identified and this, together with the course learning outcomes leads to the development of module learning outcomes, a module assessment strategy, and a teaching strategy.

The principle of constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) is clearly evident, whereby the design seeks to support the student in achieving the desired learning

outcomes by ensuring that learning and teaching activities, assessment tasks and learning outcomes are all aligned. Having established the learning outcomes, assessment is designed to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the achievement of the outcomes, and the teaching and learning activities flow from that.

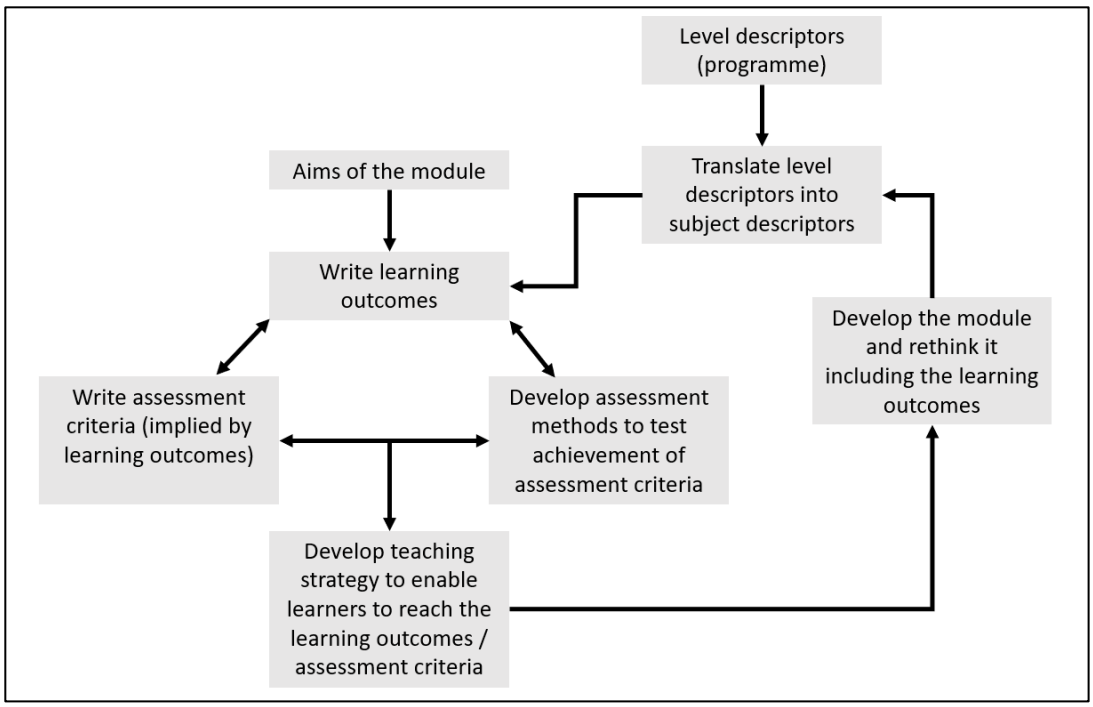

Figure 11: Map of the module development process. (Diagram by author but based on Moon (2002))

The final component of the course design process that I will consider is learning design – in other words, the design of learning activities that take place within a module. Since the 1990s, numerous toolkits have been developed in response to the growth in online and blended learning approaches. Typically, the toolkits focus on the need to ensure that students are actively engaged in the learning process rather than just being passive recipients of information. A common approach is a toolkit

that provides a set of resources to enable course teams to come together for a workshop to design learning activities within a module.

One such example of a team-based approach is known as Carpe Diem (Salmon, Jones and Armellini, 2008). The central part of the process involves storyboarding a module or unit of learning, whereby the activities that the learners are engaged in are mapped to effectively create a chronological schedule that balances activities with assessment. With a focus on integrating new technologies with established pedagogical processes (Salmon, 2004), Carpe Diem was developed primarily as a tool for designing online and blended courses, though it has also been used for traditional face-to-face courses.

The Carpe Diem approach has had a significant influence on the development of other models, including the "Design Develop Implement" (DDI) approach at Macquarie University in Australia, and the CAIeRO framework that I considered earlier. The DDI approach involves a series of four separate sessions in which teams come together to devise a blueprint for a module and use storyboarding to develop the learning activities (Seeto and Vlachopoulos, 2015). Whilst the CAIeRO framework was previously referred to in the context of course-level design, it also includes provision for module-level design. Again, a storyboard approach is used to map learning activities and cards are available to prompt course teams to think creatively about the types of activities they want learners to engage in (Usher, 2016).

My final example, known as the ABC Learning Design model, is one of the most widely cited models. It was developed at University College London (UCL) and has

now been used in eleven different countries (Young and Perović, 2020). As with previous examples, the ABC model involves intensive team-based workshops. The process uses cards to stimulate the design of learning based on six different categories of activity, namely acquisition, collaboration, discussion, investigation, practice and production (Young and Perović, 2018). Participants are prompted to think about the types of learner outputs associated with each different category of activity. The cards cover the outputs for conventional courses, but also encourage participants to consider alternative approaches commonly found in digitally based courses.

Confusion at the heart of course design

The distinction between the three levels of design is important, but I have found in reviewing numerous articles, books and guidance documents that relate to curriculum design, there is commonly a lack of clarity about whether the focus is on course design, module design or learning design. This confusion typically manifests itself in one of two ways. Firstly, there is often a failure to distinguish between course-level design and module-level design, and secondly the process of learning design is often conflated with the broader practice of curriculum design.

As an example of the first issue, in a handbook on teaching and learning in higher education there is a complete chapter on curriculum design and development (Stefani, 2008). The chapter adopts a learning outcomes approach and refers to graduate attributes and to constructive alignment. However, in setting out guidance on writing learning outcomes no distinction is drawn between course-level and module-level design. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that course-level

outcomes will focus on broad course-wide issues, whilst at module level, there will be a much sharper focus on outcomes directly related to the module domain. Furthermore, there is no recognition that course-level outcomes will take a different form to module-level outcomes because, as Usher (2014) highlights, they are not directly assessed.

The second issue is commonly found in the extensive body of literature relating to learning design. Many such publications present guidance that purports to be related to curriculum design, but in fact relates only to the design of learning activities. For example, in an article about the "Design Develop Implement" approach (Seeto and Vlachopoulos, 2015) the authors appear to present the model as a response to the challenges of curriculum development. However, the processes described in the article seem to relate to the design of learning within a unit. Similarly, coverage of the ABC model often refers to it in terms of curriculum design or course design (Young and Perović, 2016) when in fact the model is built around a workshop in which course teams design learning activities.

I am not questioning the value of learning design models such as DDI and ABC, and indeed I recognise that they are useful in helping course teams to adopt a more creative approach to designing learning activities. However, there is a risk that a disproportionate focus on the design of learning activities may lead to course teams overlooking the importance of course-level and module-level design.

My purpose in highlighting both these potential sources of confusion is to stress the value of a coherent approach to course design. In an outcomes-based approach it is

imperative that an appropriate level of attention is devoted to crafting the learning outcomes at both course-level and module-level. If the concept of constructive alignment is to be followed, the design of learning must consider the assessment and the learning and teaching activities in parallel with the learning outcomes. If course teams seek guidance in the published literature, there is clearly a risk of some confusion, that could lead to the design process becoming fragmented.

Literature review summary

I suggested in Chapter 1 that this study sits at the intersection of the fields of higher education studies and curriculum studies. In the light of this, one can perhaps appreciate how the literature on curriculum development rarely considers the process in a broad, integrated way. When viewed from a curriculum perspective the focus tends to be conceptual and considers the nature of the curriculum. On the other hand, when the curriculum is approached from a higher education perspective, a hugely diverse range of influences is revealed. There are exceptions, and indeed Ornstein and Hunkins (2016) recognise the importance of understanding the meaning of curriculum but also acknowledging what it involves, who is involved, and the relationships between the various domains of curriculum. In general, however, the literature review reveals a somewhat fragmented field in which it is difficult to gain a comprehensive overview of the process.

The literature has shown how the various conceptualisations of the curriculum generate considerable debate about the purpose of higher education, and this inevitably has an impact on the approaches that different stakeholders take in developing the curriculum. Alongside this, the literature also demonstrates the sheer

complexity of curriculum development, the diverse factors that have to be integrated into the curriculum, and the potentially confusing sources of course design guidance. Higher education institutions must operate within a framework influenced by government policy, regulatory requirements and societal expectations. Within each institution, the process will be subject to cultural influences, the infrastructure for learning and teaching and the needs of students themselves. Institutions respond by developing their own curriculum frameworks and quality assurance systems. These factors feed into a course design process, along with the power of the discipline, which can exert influence over the traditions and mindsets of academic staff. The design itself is informed by an array of conceptual and procedural guidance, and the process involves a wide range of different parties.

Taken as a diverse body of literature, there is ample coverage of all the issues referred to here. However, the individual studies that make up this literature tend, as noted by Tight (2012), to take a relatively narrow view of particular aspects, or to focus on the mechanics of course design. There appears to be limited coverage that adopts a more holistic view of curriculum development. As Warren (2016) suggests, the interplay amongst the various influences on the curriculum receives very little attention.

Anakin et al. (2017) claim that “curriculum change can be theorized as participation in sociocultural practices” and therefore “multiple levels of analysis become necessary to study the diverse range and functions of curriculum change factors at the different levels of social organisation in which they appear” (p.3). Such an

analysis must take into account the interactions between both internal and external factors, as well as “individual histories, traditions, cultures and purposes” (ibid).

To address the research questions, a theoretical framework is required that acknowledges the multiple perspectives on curriculum development and takes account of the various traditions and influences. In the next chapter, I will argue that activity theory provides just such a framework.

Chapter 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview

In this chapter I will present my rationale for using activity theory as the theoretical framework for this study. I will locate activity theory within the broader field of sociocultural theory and distinguish it from alternative approaches. I will then offer a detailed exposition of activity theory to show how it can be applied to curriculum development.

To identify one's theoretical framework, Merriam (2009) maintains that we must first consider our disciplinary orientation – in other words the "lens through which you view the world" (p.67). Thus, I, as an educator with experience in curriculum development will approach the topic differently to, say, an expert in business processes. This notion of a lens is also used by Anfara and Mertz (2014), who provide examples of theoretical lenses that can be applied to study phenomena and suggest that the diversity of theoretical frameworks available to us allow us to see familiar things in different ways (p.15).

Purpose of theory

According to Trowler (2016) there are six typical characteristics of theory, each of which enables a particular function. These functions are: classifying the components of a system and how they are related; depicting how a system operates; explaining a range of phenomena; predicting outcomes; contextualising processes in wider social structures; and guiding research interventions. Hammersley (2012) offers a slightly different approach by identifying seven different "senses" given to theory, each representing a diverse function (p.393). Hammersley's seven functions are neatly

summarised by Bligh and Flood (2017) who refer to them using the following terms: normative; hypothetical; abstracting; contextualising; explanatory; predictive; and paradigmatic (p.129). There is reasonable alignment between Trowler's and Hammersley's categories, with both of them identifying various common roles for theory. It is important to note, as Trowler (2016) points out, that in social science research, it is neither necessary nor useful to deploy all these functions. I will refer in due course to the particular functions that are relevant in the context of this study, but first I would like to examine the broader theoretical field.

Sociocultural theory

My research is founded on sociocultural theory which has its roots in the work of the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s and 1930s. Vygotsky propounded the theory that human behaviour is influenced by factors other than simply instinct, and that culture has an impact. According to Wang et al (2011), sociocultural theory recognises that human cognition is developed through engagement in social activities and cannot be separated from cultural and historical contexts.

In the field of higher education, Paul Trowler and colleagues have used sociocultural theory extensively, and in particular have made use of social practice theory as the basis for understanding change in universities (Trowler, 2005; Trowler, 2008; Trowler et al., 2009; Trowler et al., 2012). They identify two particular strands of theory as being particularly significant, namely communities of practice theory and activity theory.

Communities of practice theory is associated primarily with the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and is based on the idea that people who share a concern for something they do, will learn how to do it better as they regularly interact. Trowler and Knight (2000) highlight the limitations of this concept, in that it focuses on a particular group of people (the community of practice) and does not fully acknowledge the role of other elements within a context. Furthermore, it does not take account of the operation of power within the workplace (Trowler et al., 2009). The other strand of sociocultural theory, namely activity theory, goes some way to addressing these shortcomings, and I will now provide a more detailed examination of the theory.

Activity theory

As a strand of sociocultural theory, activity theory, or to give it it's full title, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), is "a powerful socio-cultural and socio-historical lens through which we can analyse most forms of human activity" (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, p.62). The theory is defined by Kuutti (1996) as a "philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as developmental processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time" (p.25). The origins of activity theory, can be traced to Vygotsky, whose particular contribution was the idea of mediation, whereby we acknowledge that humans control their own behaviour by using artefacts (Engeström, 1999a;). Thus, humans differ from animals insofar as their activity is purposeful and carried out using tools which can be either physical or psychological (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014). Vygotsky's idea of mediation is typically represented in diagrammatic form by

a simple triangle showing the subject acting on the object but using mediating tools or artefacts (Figure 12).

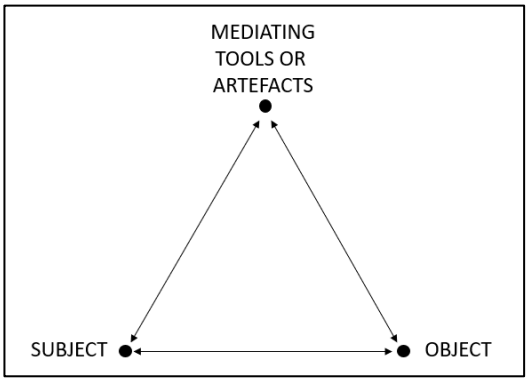

Figure 12: Vygotsky's triad of subject, object and mediating tools or artefacts (Diagram by the author, but based on Engestrom, 2001)

Vygotsky's basic model was developed throughout the twentieth century, initially by his own student and colleague, Aleksei Leontiev, but more significantly by a Finnish educational psychologist, Yrjö Engeström. It was Engeström who expanded Vygotsky's original model into a more sophisticated (second generation) model representing a collective activity system as shown in Figure 13 (Engeström, 1999b, Engeström 2001).

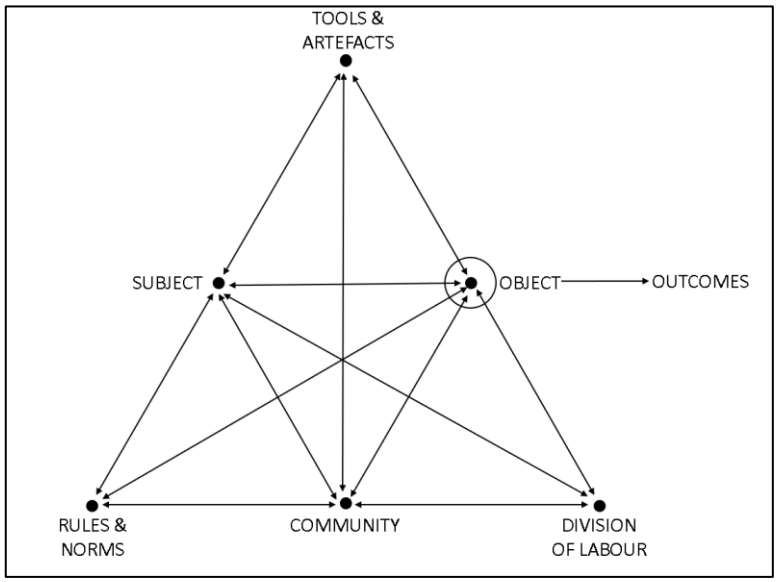

Figure 13: Engestrom's model of a collective activity system (Based on Engestrom, 2001)

The second generation model addresses a significant shortcoming in the basic model of activity theory by incorporating other aspects of activity that are socially mediated (Bligh and Flood, 2015). As Havnes (2004) indicates, participants in an activity are engaged in a social system (community) and their actions are influenced by rules and norms, and by the different roles that participants in the system have (division of labour). Kuutti (1996) notes that the basic, single triangle is too simple to convey the complexity of relations between individuals and their environment, so the community element is added to represent others who share the same object. The addition of community creates new relationships: between subject and community, and between community and object. These two new relationships are in turn mediated by rules and division of labour respectively (ibid.).

In later work, Engeström developed the principles of cultural-historical activity theory into even more sophisticated models capable of analysing two interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001). The focus of this so-called 'third generation' of activity theory was the boundary between two activity systems and the potential for learning within this space (Wilson, 2014).

Rationale for using activity theory

In this study I use activity theory as a framework within which to consider curriculum development as an activity system. My focus is deliberately on the second-generation model of activity theory because I am considering a single activity system rather than multiple systems. Activity systems analysis is a method "designed to enhance understanding of human activity situated in a collective context" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010 p.1). It will facilitate a holistic analysis of curriculum

development by taking into account the broader context in which the process occurs. This ability to locate complex phenomena within a wider social context is a particular strength of activity systems analysis. Bligh and Flood (2017) identified “contextual situation” (p.136) as one of the main reasons why activity theory is used in higher education research. They also identified that activity theory is commonly selected for its ability to embody the complexity of a researched situation. Human experiences typically involve complex, intertwined variables, but research approaches that attempt to separate these variables fail to capture the richness of real-wold activities (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Activity systems analysis will enable me to derive meaning from complex data sets and thereby help me to understand curriculum development in its real-world context.

By reference to Hammersley's (2012) seven functions of theory, Bligh and Flood (2017) identified that the most frequent roles of activity theory were ‘abstracting’, ‘explaining’ and ‘contextualising’. Furthermore, one of the commonly-cited attractions of activity theory is that its foregrounding of certain concepts such as contradictions within activity systems makes it inherently relevant (Bligh and Flood, 2017). The process of curriculum design is highly complex and, as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the influences on the process are numerous and diverse. By analysing the complex inter-relationships between the various factors that influence the process, I will highlight the tensions inherent in the system. Activity theory views these tensions as sources of change and development.

Application of activity theory to the study of the curriculum

I argued in Chapters 1 and 2 that much of the existing research in the field of curriculum studies either adopts a conceptual perspective or is concerned with the mechanics of curriculum development and course design. By presenting curriculum development as an activity system, I maintain that activity theory provides a theoretical framework that enables the process to be viewed more holistically. Notwithstanding this point, I must acknowledge that my use of activity theory to study the curriculum is by no means unique.

The use of activity theory in Western research was relatively rare prior to the 1990s and, according to Roth (2004) the increasing interest in it thereafter was largely due to the publications and widespread citation of the work of Yrjö Engeström. Education was one of many fields in which its potential was recognised, alongside healthcare, law and others (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2014). A particularly common application of activity theory was in the field of human-computer interaction (e.g. Nardi, 1996). Within education studies, this seemed to spawn a significant area of research concerned with the introduction of technology into educational settings (e.g. Uden, 2007; Zurita and Nussbaum, 2007; Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009; Lautenbach, 2010; Liaw, Hatala and Huang, 2010).

Bligh and Flood (2017) undertook a detailed analysis of higher education journal articles that used activity theory as the basis for analysis. Their study provided evidence that “activity theory has become a recognised staple in the higher education research discourse” (p.131). However, whilst activity theory has been widely used in higher education research in its broadest sense, its use specifically to

analyse curriculum development is less common. Despite this, there are sufficient examples of curriculum studies referring to activity theory to suggest that the approach has some credibility. To illustrate this, I have selected four examples to demonstrate the variety of ways in which activity theory has been applied to the study of the curriculum.

The first example is a study is based at a secondary school in Singapore (Lee, 2011). The reason I refer to it here is that Lee highlights the potential of activity theory to address a number of particular challenges commonly identified for research into educational change. Three of these challenges are particularly relevant in the context of my study: firstly, Lee argues that research in this field often fails to take account of the context for change; secondly, that it simplifies many research situations and thereby overlooks inherent complexities; and thirdly, that it neglects the operation of power (ibid.). As I will demonstrate in due course, these factors are significant in the study of curriculum development in universities.

The second example is concerned with the concept of unbundling and the higher education curriculum (Cliff et al., 2020). The study uses activity theory as a theoretical lens through which to examine unbundling which, in this context, refers to the disaggregation of the components of the curriculum. An activity system model is used to depict the intersections of the components of the curriculum with digitisation and marketisation. The authors claim that the study provides a framework of engagement for higher education curriculum designers that takes into account interactions with external providers, the distribution of power, the relationships between different participants, and the question of whose interests are

served (Cliff et al., 2020). This study addresses a very different research problem to that of my own work, but nevertheless provides a useful example of the use of an activity systems analysis to examine a curriculum-related issue.

An example that is more closely related to my study is presented by Garraway (2011) who describes an interesting approach to investigating the relationship between university and work in the curriculum in a South African context. The research made use of a second-generation model of activity theory as an analytical tool to understand the factors that impact on a career-focused curriculum. The approach enabled the researchers to identify a series of questions based on the components of an activity system, and also to highlight contradictions which could form the basis of further research. The study is a rare example of activity theory being used specifically to consider the influences beyond the curriculum itself.

My final example applied activity systems analysis to a process referred to as participatory curriculum development (Alexander and Hjortsø, 2019). The context was a group of universities in sub-Saharan Africa, where the curriculum design process has traditionally been highly centralised, in contrast to a participatory approach that involves a much wider range of stakeholders from both within the university and externally. The study used the activity system as an analytical tool to identify a total of ten contradictions in the process. Interestingly, the components of the activity system were used both to frame the data collection and to analyse the data itself using an *a priori* coding system. The context for this study was very different to that of my own, and the nature of the research problem was also quite

different, but it nevertheless provides a good example of the use of activity theory specifically to investigate the tensions within the process of curriculum development.

The examples cited demonstrate the potential of activity theory within the broad field of higher education and specifically within the field of curriculum studies. Activity theory has been used to address perceived shortcomings in other theoretical frameworks and has been selected for its ability to aid the understanding of the curriculum within its context. In due course, I will explain in detail how I have used the activity system as the framework for my analysis, but first it is appropriate to provide a general overview of the components that make up an activity system.

Overview of activity system components

To use activity theory effectively, the focus initially should not be on subjects or objects or tools, but on the activity – in other words, something that is happening (Roth et al., 2012). As Foot (2014) indicates, rather than focus on individuals, the idea of activity centres on human collectives and therefore considers how people interact with one another and with institutions. In activity theory, the unit of analysis is the activity system as a whole, and this enables the multiple perspectives and traditions of the various members of the system to be considered, together with the multiple layers and diverse histories within the system (Engeström, 2001). Activity theory therefore has the potential to represent the complexity of the whole, whilst enabling multi-dimensional analysis to be undertaken (Foot, 2014). The activity system is not just a static structure which depicts the elements of a system. It is dynamic, and it thereby enables the relationships, interactions and contradictions between the

elements to be analysed (Kuutti, 1996). For this research study, the activity will be the curriculum development process.

Subject

To identify the subject in an activity system, one has to establish who is involved in carrying out the activity (Mwanza and Engeström, 2003). Given that one of the fundamental principles of activity theory is that the activity involves human collectives rather than individuals, it is inevitable that there are many different potential subjects in any activity system. To determine the subject, one therefore has to decide on the individual or group whose viewpoint is going to be adopted (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). In this study I adopt the viewpoint of the course team, because I consider the course team members to bear the primary responsibility for the design of a course. Activity theory recognises that the orientation of the subject(s) towards the object will be shaped by their interests, values and traditions (cultural) and grounded in their past experiences and the way the activity system has evolved over time (historical) (Foot, 2014). One of the great strengths of activity theory is that, whilst the viewpoint of a particular group can provide a focus, the overall analysis involves consideration of the broader social system (Havnes, 2004). Thus, although the course team will be identified as the subject, the analysis will not overlook the surrounding institutional practice.

Object and outcomes

The notion of the 'object' in an activity system is quite complex, and the literature suggests that it is open to different interpretations. Mwanza (2002) implies that we can identify the object simply by asking why the activity is taking place, but Blackler

(2009) suggests that objects are not so easy to understand, because they can be "simultaneously given, socially constructed, contested and emergent" (p.27). Kaptelinin (2005) (citing Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research, n.d.) defines the object of activity as "the 'raw material' or 'problem space' at which the activity is directed and which is molded and transformed into outcomes" (p.10). This idea of it being a problem space is also referred to by Garraway (2011) who uses the term to refer to an object occupying the attention of both the subject and the wider community. Kuutti (1996) suggests that an object could be either a material thing, or something less tangible like a plan, or indeed something completely intangible like an idea. The important requirement is that it is something that can be manipulated and transformed by the participants in the activity (ibid.)

The object is typically represented by a circle in the activity system model (see Figure 13 above) which, as Hardman (2005) notes, indicates that the space is subject to change. Engeström (2010) suggests that the circle is indicative of both the focus and the ambiguity of the object, but as Blackler (2009) notes, we should not view this as a shortcoming of the object. Instead, we should simply recognise that object is representative of the complexity of human activity.

According to Engeström (1999b) objects should not be confused with goals, because goals are associated with specific actions and therefore have clear beginning and end points. Objects on the other hand simply provide a direction for the activity, and therefore orient the activity towards a horizon. As Foot and Groleau (2011) indicate, the object unfolds like a project under construction as the various parties involved in

the system interact with one another and with their tools. The analogy of the horizon is pertinent because for many activity systems the object may never be fully completed or reached. Kuutti (1996) suggests that the object itself may undergo changes as a result of the activity, so in some cases the true nature of the object will only reveal itself as the activity progresses.

In the curriculum development activity system, I suggest that the object is the design of a course, because this represents the problem space to be worked on. The subject uses tools or artefacts, and interacts with other members of the community to work on the object. As a result, the object may be transformed into an outcome (Garraway, 2011), but outcomes may be intended or unintended. The outcomes from the process are difficult to anticipate. Outcomes might be expressed in terms of the validation process, the student experience, the level of recruitment, or various other perspectives.

Tools and artefacts

One of the central tenets of activity theory is that the subject in the activity system does not act directly on the object. Instead, as Kuutti (1996) points out, the relationship is mediated by artefacts or tools. Understanding the nature of artefacts or tools is essential if activity theory is to be effectively utilised. Activity systems will invariably employ a wide range of tools, and the more complex the activity system, the more difficult it is to identify the full nature and extent of the tools and artefacts used. At a basic level, tools will include material items such as pens and paper, computers, telephones and so on. As Foot (2014) points out, these are used almost unconsciously, but other tools and artefacts can be much more symbolic or

conceptual, such as protocols, scientific methods or models, hypotheses, explanatory models, or even abstractions such as epistemological paradigms, ideologies and socio-political visions. In the curriculum development activity system, the actions of course teams working on a course design is likely to be mediated by institutional procedures, curriculum guidance, curriculum frameworks, and expertise within the institution.

Tools can both enable and constrain activity (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). On the one hand, they are employed by the subject to manipulate the object in order to pursue the desired outcome (Foot, 2014) but, as Kuutti (1996) indicates, we also need to acknowledge the historical 'baggage' that tools carry from their own development.

Community

The basic structure of activity theory, whereby the relationship between the subject and the object is mediated by tools, is too simplistic. The focus of activity theory is not on the actions of individuals but on collective human activity in a social setting. Engeström (2001) refers to the "multi-voicedness of activity systems" (p.136) in which multiple points of view, traditions and interests are represented. Thus, an additional element – the community – is incorporated into the system. Foot and Groleau (2011) identify this "community of significant others" as the "multiple

individuals and groups who share an orientation to and engagement with" the object (para.3).

In the context of curriculum development, the community could include a significant range of participants. The course team (the subject) will work within a system that involves many different parties and will therefore interact with other individuals and groups who will have an influence, including students, managers, educational developers, and quality assurance staff.

All community members will interact with the subject and the object and have influence which can be either supporting or constraining (Garraway, 2011). As Kuutti (1996) notes, the incorporation of the community in the activity system model, introduces two new relationships: that between subject and community, and that between community and object. These two relationships are in turn mediated by rules and norms, and by division of labour respectively.

Rules and norms

In an activity system, the term 'rules' refers not just to the codified rules, regulations or principles which govern the performance of an activity, but also to the cultural norms that influence behaviour within a system or organisation (Garraway, 2011; Mwanza and Engeström, 2003).

In the curriculum development activity system, the most obvious rules would be institutional regulations and quality assurance requirements. If a course is professionally accredited, a whole raft of additional rules may be imposed by a

professional body. Societal expectations can also, in effect, impose rules on the design of courses, particularly the expectation that graduates are employable.

In addition to formal rules, we must also consider how cultural norms influence the activity system. These could be tacit habitual practices (Garraway, 2011) that participants in the system do not recognise as rules, but nevertheless govern how people behave. Academics working within higher education institutions often have significant autonomy in the exercise of their responsibilities, and norms therefore provide behavioural guidelines and moral boundaries (Braxton, 2010). The norms could be derived from the institution itself, or they could be associated with particular academic disciplines.

Division of labour

Within the activity system the division of labour is concerned with the ways in which the tasks directed at the object are divided up. As Foot (2014) indicates, this includes both the horizontal division of tasks and the vertical division of power. The horizontal division of tasks refers simply to the ways in which tasks are distributed amongst members of the community. The vertical division of power refers to the ways in which roles are organised (Mwanza and Engeström, 2003) and to the relative influence that different participants can exert as a result of their position, their status, or their access to resources or rewards (Foot and Groleau, 2011).

The horizontal division of tasks should be a relatively straightforward aspect to consider, both within the course team and between the course team and other participants in the system. The more interesting aspect of division of labour is the

vertical division of power. This would need to consider how time and resources are allocated to curriculum activities when compared to other activities such as teaching, administration and research.

Contradictions (or tensions) within activity systems

In any complex activity system it is inevitable that there will be imbalances between the various elements of the system. Kuutti (1996) outlines how these imbalances are caused both through changes in the external environment and shifts in the relative influence of elements within the system. In his extensive work on activity theory, Engeström (e.g. 2014) refers to these imbalances as contradictions. Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2014) identify various alternative terms used in the literature, including disturbances, misfits, conflicts and systemic tensions.

A fundamental contradiction that exists in activity systems is that between the use value and exchange value of commodities (Engeström, 2008). The 'use value' of an activity is the direct benefit to the activity's participants, whereas the 'exchange value' is its worth when it is exchanged for something else. To illustrate such a contradiction Foot and Groleau (2011) use the example of a doctor working in the American health care sector. Doctors provide treatment to their patients in order to heal them, but they operate within a socioeconomic system which exchanges this service for a financial compensation. Thus, there may be an inherent contradiction between the dual objects of a health clinic, namely to promote the health of its patients and to increase the revenue of the clinic. It is arguable that a similar contradiction exists in education in the UK, and indeed Williams (2011) makes precisely this point.

These internal contradictions can occur within each of the elements of the activity system, between two elements of the system, or indeed between different activity systems. Engeström (2008) highlights how contradictions should not be viewed simply as problems or conflicts. They represent structural tensions that have arisen over time, but they have a central role to play as sources of change, because the disturbances they produce can reveal opportunities for innovative solutions, leading to new ways of structuring the activity (Foot, 2014). Thus, rather than seeing contradictions as obstacles to be overcome or problems to be fixed, they should be viewed as starting points for developmental learning in the system (Garraway, 2011). This is referred to as expansive learning by Engestrom (1999), and he sets out a typical sequence in a so-called expansive learning cycle. The basis of this cycle is that analysis of the contradictions is vital in order to redefine or reconfigure the activity system (Foot, 2014).

Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2009) point out that transformation does not always occur as a result of contradictions. Contradictions themselves can constrain progress unless they are identified and the potential for transformation is recognised. This can be a challenge, as some contradictions are not easily identifiable because they may be taken for granted and therefore invisible to most participants in the system. Overlooking contradictions could mean overlooking opportunities for developmental work and the potential for improvement in the system. Engeström (1999c) (citing Engeström, 1996) highlights a recurring tendency amongst researchers to intervene in activity systems by appropriating new instruments. He argues that the emphasis on “instrumental remediation” (in other words, new tools)

often entails a “neglect of corresponding transformations in the division of labour, community and rules” (p.91).

Summary

The case has been made for using activity theory, and an explanation of the theory has been provided. A particular strength of activity theory is that it helps us to locate complex phenomena within a wider social context. Viewing curriculum development as an activity system thus recognises the cultural and historical aspects of relationships and working practices, and will allow me to analyse the social practices, norms, values and predispositions involved, and to identify the tensions within the system.

Later, in Chapter 5, I will use activity theory to analyse my primary data by applying an activity systems analysis to the interview findings. In doing so, I will explain how the components of an activity system provide a framework for the analysis of curriculum development. However, I first need to set out my approach to the research and explain how the activity systems analysis fits into this.

Chapter 4: METHODOLOGY

Overview

In this chapter I will explain my approach to the research, including the rationale and justification for my research methods and how these align with my research questions. Specifically, I will set out my research design in detail, describe how I conducted the data collection and analysis, and discuss broader methodological issues related to my research.

Any research study has to be designed specifically to address one's research goals. The central thesis that underpins my research is that we can only understand the curriculum development process fully by looking at it holistically and locating it within its wider social context. I contend that treating curriculum development as an activity system allows us to bring to the surface the tensions that exist within the system, and to use these as sources of change. I will use this chapter to explain and justify my use of a basic qualitative study involving interviews conducted at twelve English universities. I will also explain how I analysed the interview data thematically and then considered it within the framework of an activity system to identify the inherent tensions present within the curriculum development process.

The starting point

In my view, the starting point for any research design must be to acknowledge where the research topic has come from. Merriam (2009) indicates that, in applied fields of practice such as education, it is common for topics to come from a work setting where the researcher has a personal interest in the field. Thus, the topic may come from observing and asking questions about everyday activities. This is certainly true

in my case, where I have considerable experience in the field, and this will inevitably mean that I approach the research with certain preconceptions. This has necessitated a certain reflexivity, whereby I have endeavoured to remain conscious of my own biases and assumptions at every stage of the research and to reflect on my approaches (Begoray and Banister, 2010).

I maintain that my experience in the field provides me with an advantageous empathy towards the subject (Roberts, 2002) that a novice in the field simply would not have. Nevertheless, I do feel that it is important for me to be open about this and set out my stance in relation to the topic. As I stated in Chapter 1, my personal experiences have led me to believe that curriculum design is not very well understood by many academics. By declaring my stance in this way, I hope that readers may consider my findings "in light of (my) particular situatedness" (Begoray and Banister, 2010, p.790).

Philosophical perspective and associated research paradigm

As Blaxter et al. (2010) note, selecting a suitable approach to one's research is not simply about choosing the data collection technique, but also requires acknowledgement of the paradigm that underpins the research. The paradigm selected should align with the philosophical assumptions we make about the world (ontology), how we understand the world (epistemology), and our methodological preferences (Maxwell, 2009).

My research is situated within a constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is socially constructed and that individuals within social phenomena have

a role in fashioning them (Bryman, 2004). As Mason (2002) notes, such research tends to be grounded in an interpretivist philosophical position and is concerned with how the world is "interpreted, understood, experienced or produced". I reject the positivist view that human behaviour is governed by universal laws (Cohen et. al., 2007) and I believe that in order to understand the curriculum development process I must consider the standpoint of the individuals who are involved. As Bryman (2004) notes, research involving people and their institutions is fundamentally different to that of the natural sciences. My study has been conducted on the basis that curriculum development takes place within a social context and my theoretical framework recognises the cultural and historical aspects of relationships and working practices.

Research strategy

My overall strategy for this study is oriented towards qualitative research. Richards and Morse (2012) state that one of the main reasons for working qualitatively is that the research questions require it. My research questions are concerned with curriculum development and the associated social practices. Specifically, the questions are concerned with the factors that influence curriculum development and the extent to which activity systems analysis can provide a means of considering curriculum development holistically. Curriculum development does not just happen – it is conducted by individuals and teams of people interacting with one another, usually within an institutional context. Each individual brings their own attitudes and beliefs to the process but will be subject to the social, cultural and regulatory norms of the institution. Lichtman (2009) notes that describing and understanding human

interactions is one of the critical elements determining the use of qualitative research.

Maxwell (2009) suggests various intellectual goals for which qualitative studies are useful. These include understanding the processes through which actions take place, understanding the meaning for participants of the actions they are involved with, and understanding the context within which participants act and the influence this context has on their actions. These are all relevant goals for this study, as I have sought to understand the curriculum development process and what curriculum development means for the people involved. Merriam (2009) notes that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Lichtman (2009) indicates that qualitative research involves the study of a situation in its entirety, rather than the identification of specific variables. This is also relevant in my study because I want to consider curriculum development within its broader context by taking a holistic view of the process.

A further relevant factor in my adoption of a qualitative research strategy is the use of a theoretical framework based on activity theory. Yamagata-Lynch (2010) makes the point that researchers who undertake investigations within an activity theory framework should follow sound qualitative research methods. She maintains that a key role of the activity theory researcher is to make sense of and report participants' lived experiences. She also alludes to the importance of reflexivity in conducting such research by suggesting that researchers need to "constantly evaluate how

interpretations of observations in a natural setting are being influenced by their personal values" (p.65).

Research approach

The literature on qualitative research methods is inconsistent in the way it is structured and the terminology that is adopted in describing alternative approaches. Cohen et al. (2007) distinguish between three particular variants of qualitative research approaches, namely phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and symbolic interactionism. Merriam (2009) identifies numerous alternative approaches including phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative analysis. Merriam (2009) also highlights the challenge faced by qualitative researchers in trying to determine what "kind" of research study they are doing. I confess to having fallen into this trap in the early stages of this study. I knew what I wanted to achieve, but I was concerned that I needed to somehow attach a complex-sounding label to my research, and I therefore found myself going through a process of elimination.

Each of the alternative approaches is oriented towards a particular type of study. For example, ethnographic researchers are likely to immerse themselves in a social setting for an extended period of time to observe behaviours and develop an understanding of a culture (Bryman, 2004). Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and seems more appropriate for studies involving emotions. Grounded theory is concerned with developing an inductively derived theory about a problem from empirical material and its analysis (Flick, 2014), whilst narrative analysis attempts to make sense of people's experiences by using stories and storytelling as a source of data (Guest et al., 2013). Symbolic

interactionism focuses on the linguistic and gestural communication between people and, as Polk (2017) indicates, is typically used to study different contexts and relationships in which people interact.

None of these approaches felt appropriate for my study, and having effectively ruled them out, I realised that the approach that Merriam (2009) refers to simply as a "basic qualitative study" (p.23) described almost exactly what I was aiming to do. She suggests that, with this approach, the researcher is concerned with understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. She maintains that researchers conducting a basic qualitative study are interested in people's interpretations of their experiences, the way in which they construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to their experiences. This aligns very closely with my research goals because I have sought to make sense of curriculum development as an activity system by analysing the experiences of the various parties involved.

Framework for data collection

Whilst I have identified my research approach as a basic qualitative study, this alone does not provide an adequate framework for the collection of data. In my initial planning for the thesis I had envisaged a research design based on case studies. I first intended to investigate the curriculum development process at a number of different universities, adopting Yin's (2018) model of multiple case-study design. However, I realised I was not concerned with the particularities of a specific institution or a specific course, but rather I was concerned with a process, namely curriculum development. Furthermore, a significant challenge in conducting multiple-case studies, as highlighted by Yin (2018), would have been the resources and time

required. An investigation of curriculum development at multiple institutions would have required access to numerous participants at each institution. Whilst I was confident that I could identify and establish contact with one or two individuals at various universities, I realised that the process of identifying potential research subjects, selecting suitable candidates and negotiating access to those candidates would have been highly time consuming and beyond the scope of this thesis.

I then considered conducting an in-depth case study at my own institution, given that I would be able to achieve the depth of access required for such a study. However, I was concerned that using only my own institution would result in a very narrow data set and may have only reflected the context of the institution rather than the curriculum development process in general.

I decided to address this concern by adopting a two-stage, hybrid approach based on qualitative interviews. In the first stage, my intention was to achieve breadth in my study by interviewing relevant individuals at multiple universities and identifying key issues. In the second stage, I wanted to examine those issues in much greater depth at my own institution. This raised a further concern about whether I would realistically be able to call my approach a case study design, but I realised that I was once again becoming constrained by a perceived need to attach labels to my research. Tight (2010) presents a powerful argument that the term ‘case study’ in social research is rarely meaningful and is often used simply as a label in an attempt to confer respectability on research. He acknowledges that the guidance on case study research provided by authors such as Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) is helpful,

but suggests that its value may simply be in relation to social research that studies "a particular example, or examples" (Tight, 2010, p.337).

So, the framework for my data collection might more honestly be called what Hatch (2002) refers to as an interview study. Hatch notes that interviews are the primary data collection method in many qualitative projects. Qualitative interviewers ask open-ended questions and encourage participants to explain their perspectives on the issue at hand. In effect, the interviewers are working with the participants to co-construct understandings that are reported as interpretations.

Data sources

Having established my intention to undertake an interview study in two stages, the next question to arise was 'who should I interview?'. Devers and Frankel (2000) liken qualitative research design to an abstract drawing that has taken shape without particular subjects in mind. In order to make the design more concrete, the researcher has to select the sites and/or subjects that are capable of answering the research questions. As Maxwell (2009) notes, whenever such questions arise, one is faced with a sampling decision. Patton (2002) maintains that decisions about sampling depend on prior decisions about the appropriate unit of analysis. In higher education research, one might think of a university, or a department, or a course team as the unit of analysis. However, as Yamagata-Lynch (2010) points out, in activity systems analysis, the unit of analysis is the activity itself, which in my case is the curriculum development process. The process is the entity about which I wish to be able to say something at the end of the study (Patton, 2002), so I need to distinguish between the unit of analysis and the unit of observation. In my study, the

units of observation are the individuals I interviewed in the course of trying to learn something about the unit of analysis (DeCarlo, 2018). Thus, for the first stage of the data collection I needed to identify individuals at various institutions, which in turn meant making decisions about which institutions to select. For the second stage, at my own institution, I also needed to make decisions about which individuals to interview.

Merriam (2009) makes the point that, in any study there will be numerous sites that could be visited or individuals that could be interviewed, so sampling involves making decisions about selection. In quantitative research, the goal is often to ensure that the results are generalisable (Braun and Clarke, 2013), so probability sampling is common. This means that a random sample from a given population is identified on the basis that every individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected (Blaxter et al., 2010). The logic of sampling in quantitative research is derived from statistical probability theory (Patton, 2002) whereby a statistically representative sample allows us to be confident in generalising from the sample to the wider population. As Bryman (2004) indicates, quantitative researchers worry about generalisability because they fear that the integrity of the conclusions reached will be called into question if the results cannot be generalised beyond the context in which the research was conducted. On the other hand, qualitative researchers seek an understanding of behaviour, values and beliefs only in terms of the context in which the research is conducted (Bryman, 2004). As Patton (2002) indicates, the objective in sampling for qualitative studies is to identify "information-rich cases for study … from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to

the purpose of the inquiry" (p.230). The approach commonly adopted in qualitative research is purposeful sampling or, as it is sometimes referred to, purposive sampling.

Moser and Korstjens (2018) define purposive sampling as the "selection of participants based on the researcher's judgement about what potential participants will be most informative" (p.10). The literature on purposeful sampling generally refers to a range of different strategies that can be adopted. For example, Flick (2014) differentiates between strategies based on typical cases, extreme cases, maximal variation, intensity, critical cases and sensitive cases. The best strategy will be the one that is most appropriate to our research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In my case I wanted to use the first stage interviews to gather data from a range of different English universities about their curriculum development processes. Whilst acknowledging that I could not achieve a generalisable sample of institutions, I nevertheless wanted the sample to be broadly representative or typical (Maxwell, 2009) of the settings in which curriculum development took place. I felt that this was important given the potential significance of institutional culture, as identified in the literature review in Chapter 2. I therefore adopted what Braun and Clarke (2013) refer to as 'stratification' within my purposeful sampling. I identified four broad categories of university in England, as indicated in Table 1 below, and determined that I would include institutions from each category.

Category	Description
Older universities	Includes ancient universities and redbrick universities. Members of the Russell Group of research-intensive universities.
1960s universities	Includes the so-called plate-glass universities created on campuses, and the former Colleges of Advanced Technology
Former polytechnics	Institutions formerly overseen by the Council for National Academic Awards, given University status under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992
Modern universities	Typically, former colleges of higher education or teacher training colleges that became universities post-2000

Table 1: Categories of university in England (determined by the author)

The next question was how many universities I should include. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry, but indicate that the decision will be based on what the researcher wants to know, and what can be done in the time available. Moser and Korstjens (2018) indicate that the principle of data saturation is widely used in qualitative research. Data saturation is achieved when no new information arises from each new subject. Whilst I could not categorically anticipate when saturation would be reached, I felt that 10 to 12 institutions in total would provide a reasonable sample. This provided me with a target of three institutions in each of the four categories.

I used a combination of my own network of contacts in the university sector and some 'cold calling' of individuals whom I identified through journal articles, conference presentations and social media posts, to make contact with prospective interviewees. My objective was to interview individuals who had institution-wide involvement in curriculum development, so I targeted senior academic staff who led central learning and teaching units. In some cases, they were prepared to be interviewed themselves, whilst in others they directed me to members of their teams.

To some extent my approach involved an element of convenience sampling, as four of the interviews were with individuals that I had met previously on at least one occasion. Convenience sampling is considered by Patton (2002) as the least desirable strategy, simply because it involves picking subjects that are easy to access. Whilst I acknowledge this point, I would argue that these individuals were nevertheless highly experienced in the field of curriculum development, and therefore had valuable and relevant insights. All of the remaining interviews were with individuals I had never previously met. Furthermore, by adopting a stratified sampling approach I could reasonably claim that the sample was more representative. I imposed additional stratification by seeking to achieve a geographical spread in the sample. Whilst I had no specific reason to believe that there would be significant differences between universities based on their geographical location, I was nevertheless conscious that my study would refer to 'English' universities, so I wanted to ensure that the institutions in the study were not all from one region.

Despite some non-responses and some non-availability, the final sample for the first-round interviews consisted of twelve interviews at eleven different institutions, made up as indicated in Table 2 below. The simple reason for the twelfth interview is that one individual changed employment shortly after I had made contact and moved to an institution where I had already conducted an interview.

Older universities	1960s universities	Former polytechnics	Modern universities
			
3 universities All established 19th C or early 20th C	**3 universities** All established or became universities in mid-1960s	**3 universities** All became universities in 1992	**2 universities** Both became universities post-2000

Table 2: Breakdown of institutions in first round of interviews

The regional breakdown of the universities in the first round is shown in Figure 14 below:

Figure 14: Regional breakdown of universities in first round of interviews

The interviews in the second round were all conducted at my own institution. My sampling strategy in this instance was based simply on seeking to ensure that there was representation from the various stakeholders involved in curriculum development at the university. Contact was made directly with prospective

interviewees internally, and eleven interviews were conducted, with fourteen individuals. Their roles included course leaders, academic managers, quality assurance staff, student union representatives, and an external validation panel member. With respect to the academic staff interviewed, I sought to ensure that there was representation from a range of different academic disciplines. Conducting interviews within one's own institution raises potential concerns about 'insider research' and I will consider those concerns later in this chapter. The detailed characteristics of the interviewees from both stages will be presented in the next section on data collection.

Data collection and initial analysis

Once contact had been made with each prospective interviewee, a mutually convenient date and time was agreed for the interview. A participant information sheet providing detailed information about the research was sent to each interviewee in advance of the interview, together with a consent form which all interviewees were asked to sign before the interview commenced.

The first-round interviews were all conducted face-to-face. This involved a significant amount of time, both in arranging the interviews and travelling to each interviewee's place of work. Interviews lasted between 54 and 80 minutes, giving a total interview time of 831 mins (13 hours, 51 mins) for all twelve interviews. The characteristics of the interviewees, and the details of the duration of each interview are set out in Table 3 below. Interviewees' names have been changed to respect anonymity.

	Duration	Title	Name	University category	Role and experience of curriculum development
1	63 mins	Dr	**Natalie**	Former polytechnic	Educational Developer. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
2	80 mins	Ms	**Charlotte**	Former polytechnic	Educational Developer. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
3	58 mins	Prof	**Hazel**	Modern university	Head of central Learning & Teaching unit. Extensive experience of working with course teams and leading staff who provide advice.
4	74 mins	Ms	**Abigail**	Older university	Educational Developer. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
5	60 mins	Prof	**Oliver**	Former polytechnic	Head of Educational Development. Extensive experience of working with course teams and leading staff who provide advice.
6	54 mins	Dr	**William**	1960s university	Assoc. Professor Academic Practice. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
7	71 mins	Dr	**Anthony**	Older university	Educational Developer. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
8	67 mins	Mr	**Andrew**	1960s university	Academic Developer. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
9	74 mins	Mr	**Nick**	1960s university	Senior Lecturer Academic Practice. Advises course teams across the university during new course development or course review.
10	79 mins	Prof	**Beth**	Former polytechnic	Head of Learning & Teaching. Extensive experience of working with course teams and leading staff who provide advice.
11	76 mins	Dr	**Gabriel**	Older university	Learning & Teaching Development Manager. Extensive experience of working with course teams and leading staff who provide advice.
12	75 mins	Prof	**Mateo**	Modern university	Head of Learning & Teaching. Extensive experience of working with course teams and leading staff who provide advice.

Table 3: Characteristics of first-round interviewees

Arranging the second round of interviews was somewhat easier, given that all participants apart from one were based at my own institution. My intention had been to conduct all the second-round interviews face-to-face but after just two

interviews, lockdown restrictions were imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This necessitated the interviews being conducted using videoconferencing technology (Microsoft Teams). I had some concerns about the potential impact of this, particularly how it might affect my ability to build a rapport with the interviewees. However, these concerns proved largely unfounded, and I did not feel that the medium had a detrimental effect on the quality of the interviews. Perhaps the fact that I already knew most of the interviewees meant that a certain rapport already existed. In any case, the literature in this field (Weller, 2017; Archibald et al., 2019) appears to indicate largely satisfactory experiences of conducting interviews in this way.

The eleven interviews in the second round ranged in duration from 46 to 86 minutes, giving a total of 715 mins (11 hours, 55 mins) across all interviews. Three of the interviews were conducted with two interviewees present, providing a total of fourteen participants. The characteristics of the interviewees, and the duration of each interview are set out in Table 4 below. Interviewees' names have been changed to respect anonymity. Furthermore, to provide an additional layer of anonymisation, the gender of some participants has also been changed, though this has deliberately not been done uniformly.

	Duration	Title	Name	Role and experience of curriculum development
1	74 mins	**Mr**	**Sam**	Student representation manager (Student Union). Trains student union officers to sit on validation panels.
2	51 mins	**Prof**	**Hilary**	External member of course approval panel. Sits on a standing validation panel for new courses, which meets six times per year.
3	57 mins	**Dr**	**Vanessa**	Head of Department (Business School). Extensive experience as a course leader, academic manager, and validation panel member.
4	57 mins	**Dr**	**Darius**	Course Leader (Computing). Has led course team through course reviews and introduction of new curriculum framework.
5	48 mins	**Mr**	**Ewan**	Head of Quality Assurance. Extensive experience of formal curriculum development processes and regulations at three institutions. Advises course teams and sits on validation panels.
		Ms	**Roberta**	Quality Manager. Extensive experience of formal curriculum development processes and regulations. Advises course teams and supports validation panels.
6	63 mins	**Mr**	**Jeremy**	Assistant Head of Department (Law School). Extensive experience as a course leader, academic manager, and validation panel member.
7	64 mins	**Dr**	**Mary**	Course Leader (Psychology). Has led course team through course reviews and introduction of new curriculum framework.
8	46 mins	**Ms**	**Phillipa**	Course Leader (Business School). Has led course team through course reviews and introduction of new curriculum framework.
9	86 mins	**Ms**	**Harriet**	Course leader (Music). Has led course team through course reviews and introduction of new curriculum framework.
10	58 mins	**Dr**	**Luke**	Course Leader (Humanities). Has led course team through course reviews and introduction of new curriculum framework.
		Dr	**Meg**	Course Leader (Humanities). Has led course team through course reviews and introduction of new curriculum framework.
11	53 mins	**Mr**	**James**	Student Union Sabbatical Officer. Sits as student union representative on validation panels.
		Ms	**Ruksana**	Student Union Sabbatical Officer. Sits as student union representative on validation panels.

Table 4: Characteristics of second-round interviewees

All the interviews, in both the first round and the second round, were conducted as semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke (2013) note that this is the most common type of interview in qualitative research and involves the researcher in having a list of questions but accepting that there is scope for issues to be raised by participants that had not been anticipated. The objective of my interviews was to identify attitudes and beliefs relating to curriculum design and the factors that contribute to or impede effective design. For the first-round interviews I had a list of themes that I wanted to explore in relation to each university, including curriculum

development processes, stakeholders involved, institutional policies, the role of the course team, the role of quality assurance, cultural norms, and time allocations. The second-round interviews covered broadly the same themes, but the focus was obviously more context-specific as all these interviews related to a single institution.

As far as possible, the interviews took the form of a conversation, allowing the participants to talk openly about their experiences and opinions. I endeavoured to help the interviewees to feel comfortable at the start of the interview by asking them a series of questions about their current role and their experience. The purpose of this was simply to get them talking about something which was uncontentious.

I then moved on to the central themes of the interview. My list of themes enabled me to ensure that the conversation addressed all the key issues. For each theme, I would start with a broad question and allow the participant to answer freely. Under each theme I had various bullet points on my list to prompt further responses. If a participant veered away from the main issue, I tended to allow this so that I could be open to additional ideas that I had not anticipated. However, at an appropriate moment I would steer the conversation back to themes as necessary.

With the consent of participants, all of my interviews were digitally recorded and simultaneously transcribed using specialist software that both records and converts speech to text using voice recognition algorithms. I subsequently reviewed and edited the automatically generated transcripts which, in my estimation, were approximately 75% accurate. A typical transcript was in the region of 9000 words, resulting in a set of raw data comprising around 200,000 words in total.

This reviewing and editing of the raw transcripts, provided a means of familiarisation with the data (Spencer et al., 2014; Braun and Clarke, 2006). By going through this process, I gained an overview of the content and began to identify some of the significant themes emerging. At this stage I did not attempt to undertake any detailed analysis but instead followed the advice of Corbin and Strauss (2015) and focused on reading the interviews in full and listening to what interviewees were saying.

The concurrent processing of the interview data and the initial familiarisation highlights a basic principle of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2009), that data analysis is conducted simultaneously with data collection. Merriam (2009) also makes the point that treating data collection and data analysis as separate processes is misleading. She notes that a qualitative approach is "emergent" (p.169) because the researcher will often not know in advance who is going to be interviewed or what questions might be asked, unless the data analysis begins as it is being collected. Thus, the analysis of the first-round interviews provided the basis for some of the questions and discussions in the second-round interviews.

Detailed analysis

The reviewed and edited transcripts of all interviews were exported from the speech-to-text software and imported into a qualitative data analysis software package known as NVivo. Both the transcripts and the NVivo files were stored securely in an encrypted cloud-based server to which only I had access.

The use of NVivo was beneficial, both in the management of the data and in the subsequent analysis and interpretation. As Spencer et al. (2014) note, such packages enable researchers to store data in one place within the project, to frame the analytic structure, and to undertake coding. Interpretation is supported through in-built facilities for searching, filtering and reorganising the text.

The detailed analysis of the data was undertaken separately for each round of interviews, such that the first-round analysis was largely completed before the second-round interviews began. Nevertheless, the procedure was broadly the same for each round. Once the data was safely in NVivo, the detailed analysis could begin. As Bernard et al. (2017) note, this involves a search for patterns in the data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place. The approach I adopted can be described in simple terms as thematic analysis. Spencer et al. (2014) claim that, strictly speaking, thematic analysis is not an approach in its own right but more of a generic method, and they identify ten different traditions or approaches to qualitative data analysis, some of which are associated with particular disciplines. Rapley (2016) appears to accept that thematic analysis is a distinct category, and includes it in a table alongside three other approaches, namely framework analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, and constructivist grounded theory, but these also are typically associated with research approaches. Braun and Clarke (2013) claim that thematic analysis in some form is common across many qualitative approaches, but it is often labelled as something else. They argue in their widely cited 2006 paper that thematic analysis should be considered as a method in its own right and propose that it offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to

analysing qualitative data. They define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79).

I will now describe the procedure I followed in undertaking my thematic analysis of the interview data. I am conscious that it can be somewhat misleading to describe it in step-by-step terms because, as Merriam (2009) notes, making sense of the data can be a highly intuitive activity, and it is not always clear where an insight has come from, or how relationships among data are detected. Nevertheless, I will at least identify the key stages that I went through in order to achieve a rigorous and systematic approach to the analysis.

The core activity in the analysis was the process of coding. Richards (2005) stresses that in qualitative data analysis, coding is not merely labelling sections of the text, but rather bringing sections of the text together so that they can be reviewed. Given that I am using activity theory as my theoretical framework, I had anticipated having a pre-existing coding frame based on the components of the activity system, namely subject, object, tools, community, rules and division of labour. Spencer et al. (2014) describe such an approach as being based on *‘a priori’* concepts adopted from the theory. I therefore initially set about going through the transcripts of the first-round interviews and attempting to code sections of the text against the various components. At an early stage in the process, I realised that this approach was effectively forcing me to code within very narrow dimensions, and I was overlooking potentially significant issues simply because they did not fit neatly into one of the coding categories. Consequently, I started the process again. This time I adopted an

'in vivo' coding approach that sought to bring to the surface the significance of what the interviewees were saying.

The NVivo software enabled this process to be undertaken in a systematic way. Working within NVivo, I went through each interview transcript line-by-line and reflected on the ideas being expressed (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Pertinent sections of text were highlighted, and a code was allocated, giving each new code a name that summarised a theme. If subsequent sections of text related to the same theme, I would allocate that code to the text, though I endeavoured to avoid standard ways of thinking and taking anything for granted. Wherever I identified an issue that I felt represented a tension in the curriculum development process I specifically used the word 'tension' in the coding name.

My objective throughout the detailed coding exercise was to move from the particular to the abstract, by shifting the focus from what was said by the participants, to what the underlying meaning was (Rapley, 2016). This was a slow and somewhat laborious process, but it did mean that I became intimately familiar with the data. The process across both sets of interview transcripts resulted in a final list of 149 themes, of which eleven referred to some form of tension.

The particular benefit of using the NVivo software for this process was that all sections of the interview transcripts that were allocated the same code could be grouped together, enabling the detailed examination of evidence from the data relating to each theme. The facility to be able to allocate multiple codes to single sections of text, and to conduct searches within the text was invaluable. However, I

should emphasise that NVivo did not do the analysis for me. I used the software primarily as a data management tool and it proved invaluable for that purpose, but the process of analysis was my personal responsibility.

Having completed my initial coding, I moved to the abstraction and interpretation of the data. This process involved looking for the ways in which responses varied, and attempting to map the range of responses (Spencer et al., 2014) against the components of the activity system. Within NVivo, I analysed the text extracts allocated to each of the 149 codes by reading through them again in detail. Unlike the initial reading of the data, here I could see the sections of the transcripts from all the interviews grouped together under particular codes. This enabled me to look for patterns and trends, but more importantly, my objective was to interpret the data using the framework provided by the activity system. I was conscious when I was analysing the data of one of the main pitfalls identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) – that of failing to properly analyse the data and instead producing a collection of labelled extracts from the interviews without a narrative. To avoid this, I created a table in a separate word-processed document with two columns, one for the NVivo codes, and one for the allocated activity system element.

For each of the 149 coded groups of interview extracts, I reviewed the text in detail and wrote a commentary in the main column of the table to summarise the issues emerging from the interviews. I then allocated one of the activity system components to that section in the second column. As part of this detailed review of the text, I also sought out further evidence of the existence of tensions within the system that was not adequately reflected in the detailed coding exercise. Wherever

such evidence was identified, this was emphasised by colour highlighting the relevant section of the commentary.

Whilst this sounds like a straightforward process, it was actually very demanding and required intense assessment and deliberation to relate the issues emerging from the interviews to my theoretical framework. Whilst this was, in effect, a further stage of the coding process, using 'a priori' codes based on the activity system, it was much more than a simple labelling process. For me it represented the heart of the analysis, where I really used the framework provided by the activity system as an effective tool to impose some order on otherwise disparate sets of data. A common challenge in qualitative research is that the categorisation of themes and sub-themes often does not take account of the relationship between the themes themselves. As Yamagata-Lynch (2010) notes, although thematic analysis is systematic, it does not necessarily reveal systemic implications. Activity systems analysis addresses this shortcoming by revealing the inherent tensions. An extract from the analysis document is shown in Figure 15 below, together with an explanation of the various sections of the table.

Once the interpretation exercise had been completed for all 149 themes, I had a word-processed document of 54 pages and almost 26,000 words. I then ran the word-processing 'sort' function on the table, sorting by the second column, so that the contents of the table were rearranged to group all the same activity system components together.

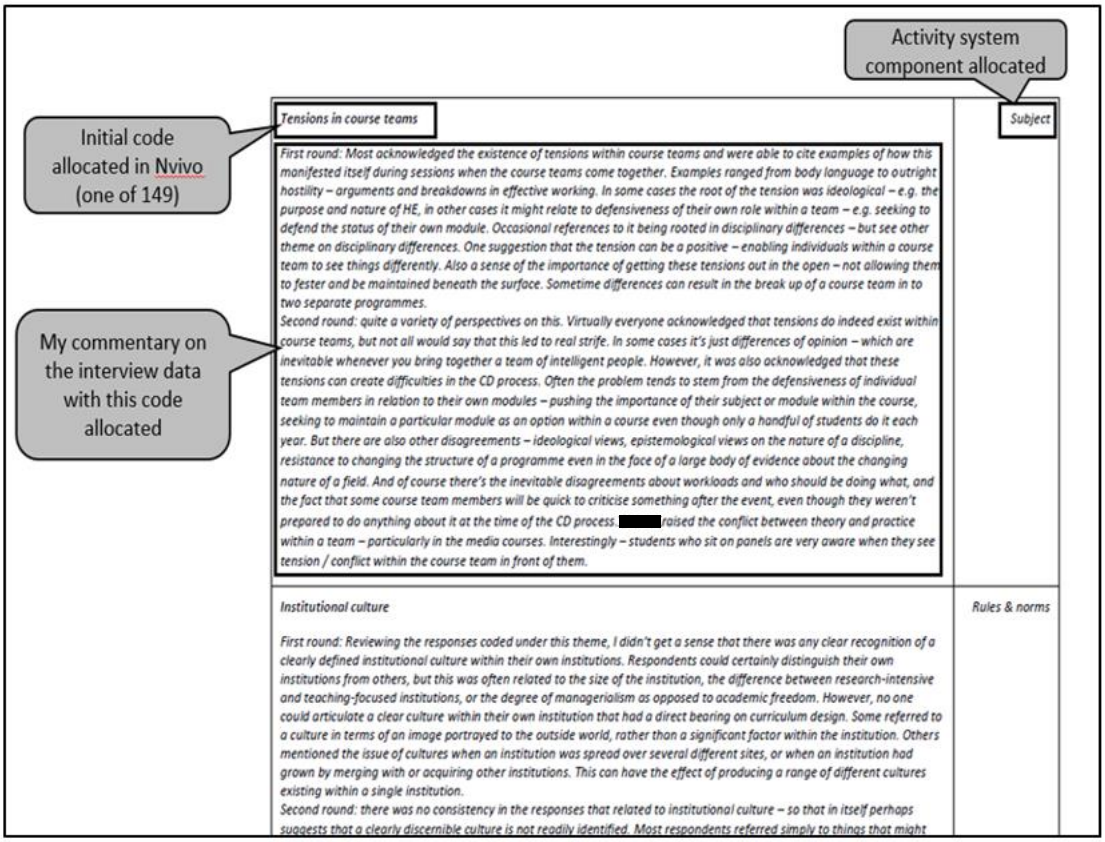

Figure 15: Extract from analysis document providing commentary on the coded text and allocating an activity system component to each code

The resultant document, with the commentary sorted according to the activity system components, provided the starting point for presenting the findings from the interviews in Chapter 5. Thus, as I considered each activity system component in turn, I had the detailed commentary to identify the significant findings, and I was able to refer back to the coded transcripts to select illustrative quotes from the interviewees. By reference to the categories for the use of activity theory presented by Bligh and Flood (2017) my analysis involved abstracting, explaining and contextualising the phenomena identified within the data.

Whilst the approach described above was appropriate for depicting the curriculum development process by reference to the second-generation activity system model,

my research questions required consideration of the inherent tensions within the process. The analysis to identify these tensions took place both within and in addition to primary analysis. Firstly, as noted above, tensions formed the basis of eleven of the coding classifications in the detailed coding exercise. Secondly, tensions were highlighted in the detailed interpretation to produce the commentary. Finally, the depiction of curriculum development as an activity system provided a visual means of further reflecting on the presence of tensions (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). This involved recognising overlaps and duplications between identified tensions and effectively carrying out a consolidation exercise. The outcome of the analysis was the six tensions that are described in detail in the discussion in Chapter 6.

Overall, my analysis and interpretation process was time-consuming, but I was anxious to ensure that I adopted a rigorous and systematic approach, to counter a common criticism of qualitative research - that it is anecdotal and imprecise, and practised in too casual a manner (Chowdhury, 2015).

Relationship between literature review and data collection and analysis

Having explained my approach to the research in detail, it is appropriate to clarify a key point relating to the sequence of the research process and its relationship with the literature review. Presenting one's work in a thesis in an ordered and clearly structured format can give the impression that the research was undertaken in a straightforward sequence that is reflected in the structure of the document. Thus, one might assume that research questions were formulated, a literature review was conducted, the data was gathered and analysed, and the thesis was written. Of

course, more often than not, particularly in qualitative research, the process does not follow such a sequence.

The relationship between the review of the literature and the empirical work involved in collecting and analysing data is rarely straightforward. Merriam (2009) makes the point that determining the best time to conduct a literature review is the subject of debate amongst researchers. Whilst most acknowledge the benefits of establishing a foundation for the research problem early in the process, there are those who maintain that with certain research approaches, the literature should only be reviewed after the data collection has taken place (Flick, 2014).

In my case the relationship between the literature review and the data collection may be thought of as "interactive" (Merriam, 2009, p.74). I initially conducted an extensive review of the literature prior to gathering any data. This considered various conceptualisations of the curriculum and identified some of the main influences on the curriculum. Alongside this, I carried out a review of the literature relating to activity theory. I produced initial drafts of both the literature review and the theoretical framework chapter, and these two components provided the basis for the planning of my research design. Specifically, I was able to formulate interview questions for the first round of interviews at various universities. My questions were clearly informed by my initial literature review, but the conduct of the interviews themselves revealed certain gaps in my review. The relationship between the interviews and the literature review therefore became somewhat iterative, as I refined the literature review in response to issues that emerged from the preliminary analysis of the interviews. For example, in my initial literature review I had only

touched on the learning and teaching infrastructure within a university, and the extent to which curriculum design was proactively supported. This was clearly considered to be a significant issue by the interviewees in the first round, so I augmented the literature review to reflect this.

The preliminary analysis, together with the augmented literature review in turn informed my approach to the second round of interviews. I was able to draw on many of the issues that had emerged in the first round and examine them in greater depth within the second-round interviewees. Issues also emerged in the second round that I felt had not been fully considered in my literature review, so the iterative nature of the relationship continued, with ongoing refinements to the literature review. When the detailed analysis of the data was conducted, I became aware of the need for refinements to my review of the literature on activity theory, and in particular the literature related to activity systems analysis. This was to ensure that the description of my approach to the analysis was underpinned by a robust coverage of the literature relevant to my theoretical framework.

The key point here is to emphasise the non-linear nature of the qualitative research process. Maxwell (2009) notes that the literature on research design has traditionally focused on a model drawn from quantitative research, where the process consists of "a logical progression of stages or tasks, from problem formulation to the generation of conclusions" (p.214). In qualitative research it rarely possible to represent the process in such a one-directional way.

Ethical considerations

The research for this study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee. Full ethics approval was obtained before any primary data was gathered. My research did not involve any significant risk of harm to the participants, nor indeed to myself, and there were no conflicts of interest involved. All interviewees were sent a participant information document in advance of the interviews, which set out detailed information about the research study and explained why they had been asked to participate. As stated in the guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), obtaining the voluntary informed consent of participants is one of the key principles in adhering to an ethic of respect. Interviewees were sent a copy of a form that asked them to give their consent to the interview. The form required them to confirm that they had read the information sheet and that they were aware of the terms under which the interview would be conducted. All participants freely completed the form, and these forms have been securely stored.

The information document made it clear to participants that they were entitled to withdraw from participation at any time up to six weeks after they had taken part, for any reason or for no reason. The rationale for the six-week time limit was that once data had been pooled with that of other participants, it would have been very difficult to extract it. This was made clear in the information document, but as it turned out no participant chose to withdraw.

All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, both for themselves personally and for their institution. I have changed the names of all interviewees in the thesis document and used generic job titles to refer to their roles. I have only identified institutions by category. Although I have not identified my own institution by name, I am conscious that it would be relatively easy for anyone so inclined to infer the identity with some straightforward online searching based on my name. For this reason, I introduced an additional layer of anonymisation for interviewees at my own institution by changing the gender of some, though not all, of the interviewees.

All data arising from the interviews, including audio recordings, interview transcripts, and NVivo files were stored on an encrypted cloud-based storage facility to which only I have access. In accordance with Lancaster University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

Insider research

Ever since I developed my initial ideas for this study, even before I had established my research approach, I was conscious that I could be conducting at least part of my research as an 'insider'. Braun and Clarke (2013) define an insider researcher as one "who belongs to the groups / communities they are researching" (p.332). This is typically associated with research that is conducted within one's own organisation. It was therefore apparent, as soon as I had decided to conduct interviews within my own university, that there was a potential conflict between my role as researcher and my simultaneous professional role within the organisation (Mercer, 2007). I will examine the particular issues associated with the second-round interviews shortly,

but I would also like to briefly highlight the fact that, by some definitions, my first-round interviews could also be classed as insider research.

Hellawell (2006), citing Merton (1972), suggests that the classic definition of insider research is too narrow. He defines an insider as "an individual who possesses *a priori* intimate knowledge of the community and its members" (p.484). He maintains that an insider does not have to be a member of the organisation being researched but could simply be part of the wider community. Whilst I would not describe my familiarity with the first-round interviewees as 'intimate' I could be considered a member of the community of higher education professionals with an interest in curriculum matters. I was aware of the existence of some of my interviewees through publications and attendance at conferences, and I had met four of the twelve interviewees in person at least once prior to interviewing them. However, I had never worked directly with any of them, and the potential influence that I could have over them, or they over me, either professionally or personally, was very limited. I endeavoured to adopt a friendly approach to the interviews and sought to build trust with the interviewees. I maintain that my 'membership' of the same community – what Trowler (2016) refers to as 'insiderness' (p.240) - actually gave me greater credibility with the participants (Mercer, 2007).

For the second-round interviews, the issue of insider research was a more significant concern. Creswell (2015) strongly discourages researchers from "studying your own backyard" (p.19), claiming that there is potential for the researcher to have predetermined expectations of what they will find (ibid.). Whilst I would acknowledge the risk of predetermined expectations, I would argue that the same

could be said of virtually any research. I can also point to the fact that the research inside my own institution has not been conducted in isolation. It followed on from the first stage which had involved eleven other institutions where similar issues had already been identified. I maintain therefore that I used my own institution to gain a deeper understanding of issues that were clearly present more widely in the sector.

Creswell also maintains that colleagues may not answer truthfully when one is collecting data from them. In a similar vein, Floyd and Arthur (2010) raise the possibility of some distortion of the data as a result of the need to maintain a professional relationship after the research has been completed. I was certainly conscious of potential ethical and power issues, and the potential influence I could have had over interviewees which, as Maxwell (2009) notes, could constitute a threat to validity. I endeavoured to deal with this in the same way I addressed the issue of personal values and beliefs – by being reflexive, and continually questioning my interpretations. I also recognised the benefits of insider research in terms of the greater credibility and rapport I had with the participants (Mercer, 2007) and the enhanced sense of trust provided by a shared frame of reference (Floyd and Arthur, 2010). This latter point was particularly evident in some of the interviews, and I firmly believe that interviewees would not have been comfortable in raising some issues with an 'outsider' researcher. The trust that existed between us enabled some quite thorny matters to be brought to the surface.

Concluding comment

To conclude this chapter, I would like to highlight the point that the greatest strength of my research is also its greatest potential limitation. My experience and personal

involvement in the field of curriculum development means that I have an inherent understanding of the field and access to an extensive range of stakeholders. However, this also means I cannot realistically detach myself from the subject of my research. This could lead to my findings being challenged, but to support my research design I would like to point to the views of Payne and Payne (2004) who describe an approach in which the researcher “is engaged in a personal and subjective process of mutual discovery with the informants” (p.155). Like them, I would argue that the objective is not neutrality, but credibility.

Chapter 5: FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AS AN ACTIVITY SYSTEM

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the interview data within the framework provided by an activity systems analysis. I will also draw out the significant points from the findings and discuss them in the context of the activity system and with reference to the literature review and theoretical framework.

I will present my findings by considering curriculum development within a university as an activity system in its entirety, involving many different participants. I will do this by examining the key themes to emerge from the data under each of the components of the activity system.

The activity system

The initial focus of an activity system analysis must be the activity (Foot, 2014), which in this case is the curriculum development process. I am concerned with the multiple perspectives that contribute to this activity within the context of English universities. Within the activity system there are inevitably many different participants, including course leaders, course team members, academic managers, educational developers, quality assurance staff, students and the wider university community. Use will be made of various different tools to guide the process, and participants in the system will be subject to rules and norms, and will be influenced by the horizontal division of tasks, and the vertical division of power. In order to grasp the multiple perspectives, it is essential that the system in its entirety is analysed. I have endeavoured to meet

this requirement by conducting interviews with representatives from all parts of the system.

The subject

In any activity system there will be many different parties involved, so in the case of curriculum development one could, for example, consider educational developers, or quality assurance staff as potential subjects. As Murphy and Manzanares (2008) note, one therefore has to decide on the individual or group whose viewpoint is going to be adopted. The focus of my study is the course team – the collection of academic staff that will bear the prime responsibility for designing the course and subsequently delivering it to students. The analysis of the interview data revealed several significant issues, centred around the nature of the course team, the role of the course leader, the challenge of fragmentation within the team and the issue of resistance to change. These points are identified in Figure 16 below and examined in detail in the subsequent text.

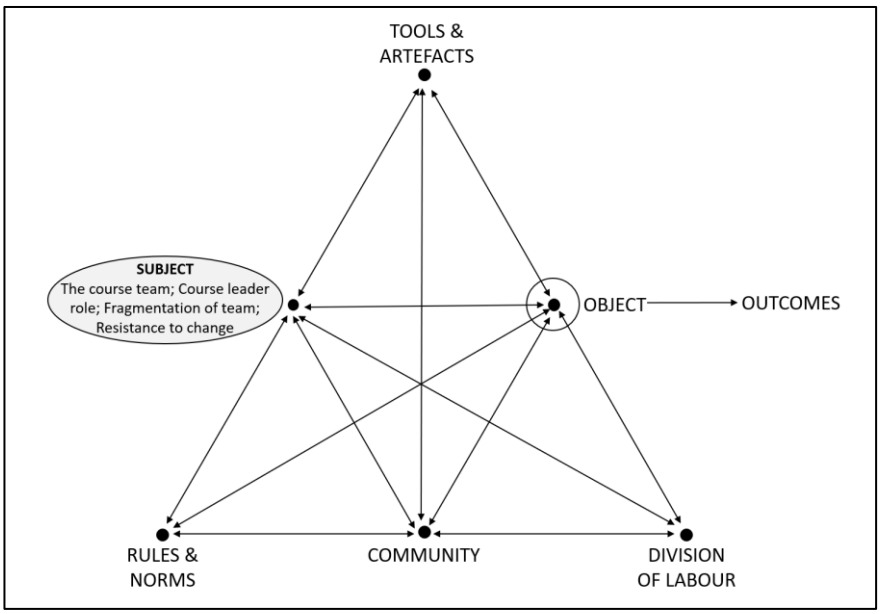

Figure 16: Activity system with Subject component highlighted

There was widespread agreement in the interviews that the course team played the most significant role in the process. Referring to the course team, one senior member of staff notes:

> *"….fundamentally, what your programme looks like, how you teach it… comes from this unique combination of people that come together to create it".*
>
> (Beth)

Reinforcing this point, a Head of Department noted that the course team were:

> *"… the key players … the people who have experience of running a programme and understanding what has worked and what has not worked"*
>
> (Vanessa)

The notion of a 'course team' is widely recognised in higher education and yet, as an organisational unit the course team rarely has any official status. In all the universities that were part of this study, course teams existed as collections of academic staff, including full time, permanent staff, supplemented by part-time staff and postgraduate students employed to teach on the course. Many staff would be members of more than one course team. The significance of this is that it is difficult to define precisely what we mean by 'course team'. Often, there will be a core group of staff who are most readily identified as being associated with a particular course and might be seen as a core team, but even this varied considerably from one institution to another.

The focal point for the identity of the course team therefore tends to be the course leader, but even this role can be difficult to describe clearly, because in all of the institutions in this study the course leader had no line management authority over

members of the course team. This creates a challenge in terms of leadership, because the course leader has significant responsibility without having any formal authority over members of the team. Line management of course team members occurs at a higher level than course leader – typically at Head of Department or School level, though there were examples of an intermediate level in the hierarchy, such as 'subject leader'.

A number of interesting issues emerged from the interviews in relation to the role of the course leader. Firstly, it was widely recognised that the role was one of coordination rather than management, particularly as course leaders do not have control over allocation of resources. This means that course leaders have to achieve progress by coaxing and persuading, and bringing colleagues with them, or using what one Head of Learning & Teaching (Beth) referred to as "soft power". For academic staff who are natural leaders this may come relatively easily, but it was evident that some course leaders found this burdensome, particularly if members of the course team were not very cooperative.

The second issue to emerge was that the person occupying the role of course leader is not necessarily the person best-suited to the role. In some cases, staff may actively seek the position, because they see it as something that will help their career progression. There was one suggestion that such people are not genuinely committed to the role but they recognise the value of having it on their CV. In other cases, it was suggested that staff simply find themselves in the position of course leader because they seem to be the most appropriate person due to their subject expertise, or because no one else is willing to do it. Unfortunately, as a Head of

Department (Vanessa) commented, the qualities that enable a lecturer to excel in their discipline are not necessarily the same qualities needed to be a good course leader. Inevitably, some course leaders take on the role somewhat reluctantly, and find the role very stressful. Concerns raised by course leaders included the lack of input from course team members and the unreasonable expectations of, and lack of support from management. One course leader summed up the difficulty of trying to coordinate the course design process:

> *"You end up at this kind of peak position where suddenly you're responsible for everything… and that in turn is… quite a significant problem, because you know if you kind of want to get everyone to have some sort of investment and take ownership - it feels like a very difficult task because I think a lot of lecturers don't see it as a part of their job description."*
>
> (Harriet)

Whilst most interviewees acknowledged the central role of the course leader in the course design process, there were comments that suggested that it is not always the course leader that provides the real momentum. This can sometimes come from one or two individuals within a course team, and such people were referred to by several interviewees as "champions". Typically, such people are capable of seeing the possibilities for a course design and have the enthusiasm and commitment to carry the team with them.

Something that seems beyond dispute is the critical importance of a functioning course team. Comments from educational developers at most universities indicate a diverse range of experiences when working with course teams, pointing to a spectrum of course team types. At one extreme there are highly engaged course

teams where the members are mutually supportive and there is a shared vision. They view the course design process as an opportunity, and enthusiastically embrace the chance to innovate and to do things differently for the benefit of the students. At the other extreme there are teams that are fragmented and dysfunctional. Such teams are made up of individuals who focus mainly on their own interests and responsibilities and have little regard for the success of the team. Mateo, a Head of Learning and Teaching at a modern university recounted some of the views he had encountered from academic staff attending course design workshops. These included comments such as: “Why am I here?” and “My curriculum is sorted”. Such views are suggestive of a scepticism on the part of some academic staff towards a structured course design process, and a suspicion towards anyone who is perceived as telling academics how to teach their subject.

Of course, the examples above are at opposite ends of a spectrum, and there are many other examples of course teams that fall between the two. However, it was notable that the views expressed by educational developers, management and even by course leaders, focused on how difficult it can be to get course teams to engage effectively with the course design process. The views revealed a wide range of issues within course teams that often manifest themselves in behaviours and attitudes amongst course team members. Given the potential impact of these issues on the course design process, I will now provide an overview of the key issues which emerged.

The challenge of course teams that consist of individuals who are primarily focused on their own responsibilities was recognised at all institutions. This was widely perceived as hindering course level cohesion:

> *"….people tend to get kind of siloed off into their individual modules and so they only think about the modules they're doing, and they don't think about how these modules fit into the design of the course as a whole."*
>
> (Luke)

As I highlighted in the literature review, many lecturers see themselves as disciplinary experts first, rather than teachers, so this could account for a preference for focusing on one's own modules. In the interviews there was a general perception that many academic staff feel comfortable when they have responsibility for individual modules. One course leader (Meg) described this phenomenon as a 'safe space' for lecturers and their 'little fiefdom'. The lack of course team cohesion is obvious to those outside the team. The Student Union Sabbatical Officers who sit on validation panels had witnessed behaviour amongst course teams that exposed a distinct lack of unity:

> *"… there isn't much shared responsibility - they don't share the values when it comes to the course itself and you can kind of see that, and it's more like a blame game…"*
>
> (James)

Other possible causes were suggested as the underlying reason for such behaviour. Some interviewees referred to the inherently conservative nature of higher education, and the tendency of academic staff to resist change and to support their case with numerous arguments. These included ideological arguments about the

purpose of higher education and the importance of academic freedom, epistemological arguments associated with particular disciplines, and arguments based on the requirements of professional bodies. Such defensiveness was perceived by some as an unwillingness to take on the additional work that change would necessitate, and this in turn can generate tensions within a course team when other members are endeavouring to promote a new approach. The view of one Head of Department (Vanessa) was that a certain amount of tension in the process was a positive thing. She suggested that course team members have a vested interest in minimal change, the implication being that this would result in less work for them. Her view was that course teams benefit from a disruptive influence coming in and questioning the status quo. Nevertheless, it is clear that such tensions can hinder the course design process. One academic developer recounted an experience of a curriculum design workshop with a course team:

> *"…. You could see who the people were that really wanted to drive change, and the frustrations they were experiencing. And then you could see the folded arms of other people thinking, you know, 'I'm not going to change this till I retire'".*
>
> (Andrew)

Resistance to change can also be a defensive reaction when staff feel that a module they have developed over many years is under threat as part of a course redesign. They perceive any attempt to remove or amend their module as a personal slight, because the module is associated with their own academic identity and status within the course team. They may also be fearful for their job, if they sense that the removal of a module may result in the redundancy of their position. Resistance to

change can be further exacerbated by risk aversion amongst academic staff, particularly when there is a perception that doing things differently could impact negatively on student satisfaction, which in turn could affect scores in the National Student Survey. Given the importance attached to NSS scores within institutions, it is not surprising that academic staff might be circumspect.

There was agreement that the challenges within course teams are best addressed by sound leadership – ideally from the course leader. An Assistant Head of Department who also had extensive experience as a course leader suggested that the role of the course leader in the course design process was essentially one of change management:

> *"… being able to lead their teams through a change they may not want … being able to balance the interests of an individual against the needs of the course ... if you get a course leader who's not very good at change management, then it can all go horribly wrong."*
>
> (Jeremy)

Not surprisingly, the issue of time was identified by almost all the interviewees. I will examine this issue further in the section on Division of Labour below, but a discussion of the course team as the subject of the activity system would be incomplete without some consideration of time. There was a very clear perception amongst course leaders themselves that neither they nor course team members were given sufficient time to deal appropriately with the course design process. The issue was also acknowledged by senior staff, educational developers and quality assurance staff. One course leader expressed his exasperation at the lack of time and

support, to the extent that he felt there was a disincentive to becoming a course leader:

> *"… we do this at the same time that we have exams to mark, we have modules to deliver and it's always a very rushed and exhausting process for staff, and for course leaders … Course leaders are not properly supported and it's as if you're punished because you are a course leader."*
>
> (Darius)

This quote seems to reinforce the view that the course leader role is challenging, as they find themselves caught between the demands of management and the expectations of colleagues.

The object (and outcomes)

The object represents "the why of the activity system" and it is impossible for an activity to be objectless (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2014 p.30). The object is the thing towards which the activity in the system is directed, and from which outcomes flow, as shown in Figure 17 below.

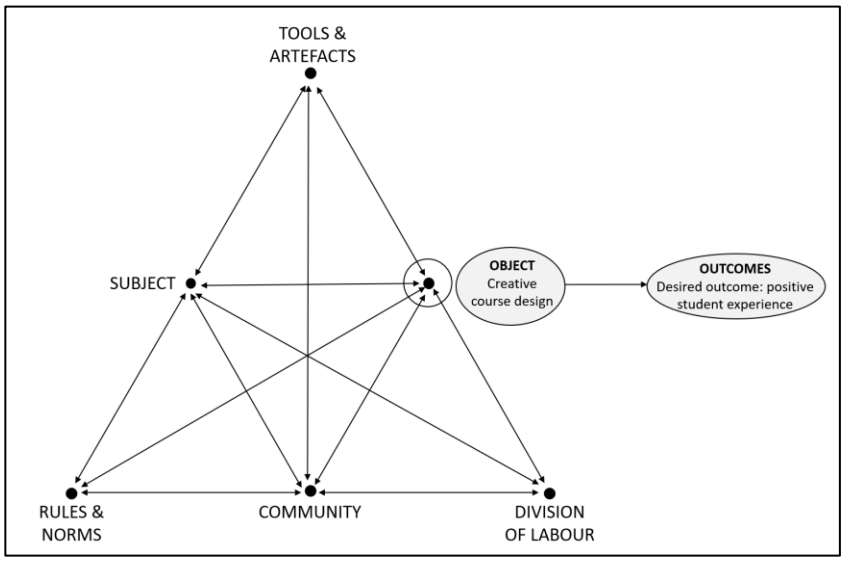

Figure 17: Activity system with Object and Outcomes components highlighted

In my activity system for curriculum development, the object is the design of a course, as this is what is effectively driving purposeful activity (Mwanza, 2002). Specifically, I see the design of a new course, or the redesign of an existing course as the problem space (Garraway, 2011) that occupies the attention of both the subject and the wider community, as indicated by the circle surrounding this component in Figure 17. The design and development of a new course, or the review of an existing course, acts as a motive for the subject (the course team) and will effectively become a project to be worked on by the team.

The precise nature of course design is difficult to determine, and the interviews showed that different participants in the activity system interpret the object from different perspectives. For some, the process appeared to be more of a bureaucratic one, in which documentation is produced in order to satisfy a validation panel, whereas for others the objective may be to produce an innovative new course, or a course which will be profitable. Even within course teams there was evidence that pointed to differing viewpoints, as some individuals were focused on designing a course that prepares graduates for jobs in a particular field, whereas others were perceived as being more concerned with development of the intellect.

Some of the views expressed by educational developers were indicative of a desire to bring course teams together so that a space could be provided for them to collaborate and be creative.

> *"I think we're trying to liberate people to think creatively as well as to think in a systematic way about curriculum design"*

(Hazel)

This reference to creativity is significant, because when it is done well, course design is a creative process that plays a vital role in developing an institution's portfolio. One course leader likened the course design process to product design in the manufacturing industry.

> *"…if you think about it, you're redesigning a product - if you were working for Dyson's or something - the (course) that I was leading … was bringing in half a million pounds of income to university per year."*

(Mary)

Whilst Mary may recognise the importance of creativity and innovation in the course design process, she suggested that the priorities of those in management positions may be somewhat different:

> *"I suppose the more senior people, like the Deans or Heads … their role involves balancing spreadsheets …. there is a drive for them to develop more products that can get more bums on seats, particularly when institutions go through financial challenges."*

(Mary)

This serves to illustrate the ambiguity of the object. An Assistant Head (Jeremy) commented that "anybody with purse strings" is inevitably going to focus on how marketable a course is. A Head of Department acknowledged that she did indeed have to concern herself with the financial viability of courses and this inevitably constrained her perspective on the course design process. She defended her position by referring to the challenge of reconciling the aspirations of course teams who may

have ambitious ideas, with the need to ensure that courses generate sufficient revenue:

> *"… in the end I'm going to be responsible for this because I am responsible for revenues and costs within the (department). And this is about employing people. This is about people's livelihoods … this is saying, 'have we got enough students … enough revenue to sustain the staff who are working (here)?'"*
>
> (Vanessa)

The outcomes of the activity system flow from the object, but outcomes can be difficult to anticipate. Some outcomes may be intended, such as a course that recruits well and provides a good educational experience for students. However, outcomes may be unintended, such as a course that does not meet its student recruitment targets or does not provide graduates with the skills needed to enable them to find suitable employment. Interestingly, when interviewees were asked directly what they saw as the purpose of course design almost all, regardless of their role, responded by reference to students. Many focused on student learning, or the student journey, or a transformative student experience. Designing a course to produce a positive student experience was clearly seen as a key consideration in the design process and could therefore be considered a desired outcome from the course design process. However, the perception of the student experience seemed to differ between the various parties involved. Amongst course leaders there seemed to be a particular focus on developing students' knowledge, skills and attributes to equip them for employment and for their future lives. This perspective appears to be more concerned with what the students get out of their engagement with the course rather than the nature of the engagement itself. This particular issue was picked up

by a student union sabbatical officer, who expressed the view that there was too much focus on what students should be able to do at the end of a course, and not enough attention paid to the experience of the students during the course.

> *"… just from observation … a lot of people are focused on the student experience on exit - instead of … when they are actually here…"*
>
> (James)

The variation in views on desired outcomes is to be expected, given that outcomes follow from the object as a result of the activity system acting on it. As with the object itself, participants' perspectives on outcomes will inevitably vary according to their personal priorities.

Tools and artefacts

Tools and artefacts may be thought of as instruments that mediate a subject's actions on the object (Russell, 2003). When the subject (the course team) acts on the object (the course design) their actions are mediated by these instruments. The interviews indicated that there are numerous tools and artefacts employed by course teams in the context of curriculum development. The key items are institutional procedures, the support and design guidance provided to course teams including educational developers, curriculum frameworks, and course design approaches based on concepts such as learning outcomes and constructive alignment. These are highlighted graphically in Figure 18 below, and the subsequent text considers them in detail.

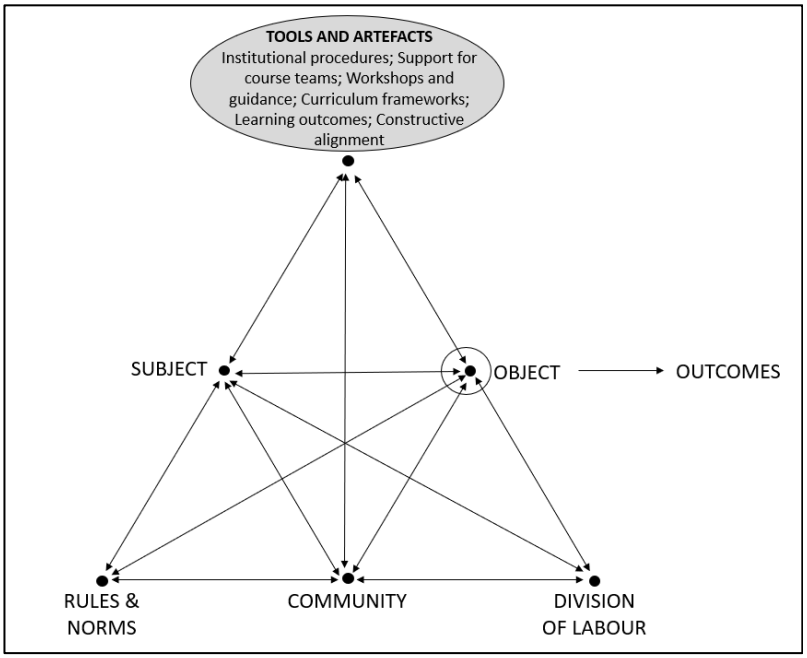

Figure 18: Activity system with Tools & Artefacts component highlighted

It was evident that all universities in the study had formal procedures relating to the validation of new courses or the revalidation of existing courses. Generally, these procedures form part of institutional quality assurance arrangements. Such arrangements typically define the requirements at each phase of the process, and it was possible to discern some broad consistency in the phases involved. A typical sequence comprised: an appraisal of the market viability of the course; consideration of course-level aims and learning outcomes; development of the course structure; design of individual modules; preparation of course documentation; consideration by a validation panel.

The consistency identified is likely to be due to the requirement for all universities to comply with the Quality Assurance Agency's Quality Code (QAA, 2018a). However, the Code's requirements are framed in terms that express expectations, and it is inevitable that there will be some variety in how universities operationalise the

requirements. From the evidence of the universities in this study, the key differences are apparent in the level of support provided to course teams, the nature and extent of formal course design processes, and the way in which institutional curriculum frameworks are implemented.

One of the most discernible differences between the institutions in the study was the extent of the infrastructure that existed to support course teams. Typically, the support and resources were provided by a dedicated central unit within the institution, but these varied both in their size and in the range of their responsibilities. Amongst the staff within such units were educational developers who work with course teams in developing a vision for their course, articulating learning outcomes and providing guidance on teaching, learning and assessment approaches. I will refer to the role of educational developers in the 'Community' section below, but here I am concerned with the support and guidance provided to course teams in the course design process.

At universities with larger central units, the educational developers may be able to offer extensive support to course teams including facilitated workshops together with guidance and support tailored to specific needs at each stage in the process. For example, one university ran a preliminary planning meeting, then a two-day course-level workshop and follow-up activities. The workshops were supported by a comprehensive set of resources that the course team could draw on. However, such an approach was not typical. The educational development support at most institutions appeared to be fairly modest. It was also notable that, in most

universities, such support was optional, so there was no obligation on the part of the course team to engage with it.

Respondents at some universities highlighted the significance of institution-wide initiatives in providing an opportunity for educational developers to work more closely with course teams on curriculum design. Often such initiatives involve the introduction of some form of curriculum framework. Several institutions in the study had introduced curriculum frameworks in recent years. These were not course design models but provided a broad set of principles which informed both the design and the delivery of courses. Some had a particular focus, such as employability or engagement with research, whereas others were more wide-ranging in scope. All of the frameworks identified within this study effectively resulted in a set of graduate attributes that all courses would be expected to develop. In the context of the 'tools and artefacts' component of an activity system, the significant point is that the introduction of curriculum frameworks provides a catalyst for curriculum change across a whole university.

Several respondents referred to institution-wide programmes, driven from a senior level, requiring every course at the university to undergo a review to align with a new curriculum framework. Such initiatives often placed educational developers in the front line, providing support to course teams in response to the requirements of the new framework. Despite this, there was very little evidence to suggest that such initiatives brought about fundamental changes in the approach to course design. The focus typically seemed to be on demonstrating alignment with framework principles and making structural changes to the curriculum. In most universities there seemed

to be scope for course teams to interpret the requirements fairly loosely. An educational developer at a Russell Group university describes the principles of their framework as follows:

> *"…it's not designed in such a way that you will be able to come up with a list of programme level learning objectives. I think the logic behind it is that … it helps generate ideas, rather than saying to colleagues within such a diverse institution, that you … have to conform to these requirements.*
>
> (Anthony)

In another case, where the focus of the new curriculum framework was on structural changes to the curriculum, it resulted in somewhat negative responses from academic staff, particularly as the required changes were prescriptive and rigorously applied in a standardised way across all courses. Course leaders were highly critical of the way in which a new framework had been introduced:

> *"…the top down-ness of it, the lack of variety … was a real problem"*
>
> (Harriet)

> *"I'm not sure that (the framework) enabled the kind of creativity that I would like to have seen"*
>
> (Luke)

> *"… there's lots of resentment across the University about aspects of the implementation of (the framework) … it did feel toxic."*
>
> (Mary)

It should be stressed that these negative views about a particular framework related primarily to its implementation, rather than the principle of the framework itself. Taking a broader view of curriculum frameworks across those universities that had

implemented such arrangements, it is clear that they do inform course design, but they represent something quite distinct from a detailed course design model. If the framework is just a set of principles, then course teams may adopt a fairly superficial approach to compliance, by simply paying 'lip service' to the principles. Equally, if the framework is interpreted as a centrally imposed set of rules relating, for example, to modular structures and assessment arrangements, then course teams will tend to react somewhat cynically, and adopt a 'tick-box' approach to compliance. Either way, it is clear that curriculum frameworks are not a substitute for creative course design processes.

All the educational developers and senior staff interviewed claimed that their institutions had a formal process for course design. Whilst these interviewees were knowledgeable about the influences that impacted on the curriculum, with two exceptions, when they were asked to explain how course design actually happened, the responses were somewhat vague. Responses alluded to curriculum frameworks, or other principles covering such issues as assessment, or the importance of design taking place at course level. At most institutions it seems that, notwithstanding the support offered by educational developers, course teams are largely left to get on with the process themselves. Unless they choose to take advantage of the support available, there will be minimal interference from the centre. Of course, one could reasonably argue that this is exactly as it should be. Course teams must take responsibility for designing the courses that they will delivering, and many academic staff would no doubt prefer to be left to develop their courses as they see fit. However, to be successful, academic staff in course teams must have a good

understanding of curriculum principles and the processes of course design. The evidence from this study suggests that this is not necessarily the case.

Most respondents appeared to recognise the significance of learning outcomes in the course design process. There were some reservations about the way in which learning outcomes are used, including concerns about the formulaic way in which they are sometimes written, and the difficulty in accommodating serendipitous learning. Such concerns can result in learning outcomes being perceived as a constraint rather than an enabler. One educational developer reflected on her varying perceptions of learning outcomes:

> *"..as a teacher, sometimes I feel a bit constrained by them. However, when you've got a team of people who don't know how to organise their module – they're a good tool because at least you feel a bit more secure - you think at least the students will learn what they need to learn"*
>
> (Natalie)

A course leader also demonstrated a clear understanding of how learning outcomes should be used in the course design process, and alluded to Fink's (2003) concept of 'backward design' :

> *"… for me, learning outcomes support a course - it works like reverse engineering. So, you start with what you want to achieve at the end … and then you work in a backwards way to creating the curriculum designed to help the students"*
>
> (Darius)

As well as learning outcomes, some interviewees went further and referred to the principle of constructive alignment. However, whilst some interviewees clearly had a

deep understanding of course design principles, the level of understanding displayed by the majority of respondents was less convincing. This was the case amongst educational developers, senior staff with institution-wide responsibilities and course leaders. Educational developers did not readily distinguish between design at course level and that at module level, and their appreciation of constructive alignment appeared in some cases to be somewhat perfunctory. Amongst course leaders there seemed to be recognition of the importance of backwards design, but limited evidence of how learning outcomes can contribute to an effective course design. One course leader actually admitted that learning outcomes can be:

> *"… fairly arbitrary and can come retrospectively … you design your module to do all the things you want it to do and then, to meet kind of various institutional requirements, you sort of invent staged learning outcomes afterwards"*
>
> (Luke)

Fundamentally, it seems that there is a distinct lack of understanding of the course design process, particularly amongst those who are tasked with undertaking it – namely the course team members themselves. At one university, various explanations were offered for this. Firstly, the recurring issue of time was raised, with concerns expressed that course leaders and course team members simply do not have the time to devote to gaining a deeper appreciation of the principles involved. Secondly, in the absence of detailed understanding and often under time pressure, course design tends to default to a content-driven process. This means that academic staff focus predominantly on the content of modules rather than on the learning outcomes of either the modules or the course.

"I can think of colleagues that just want to teach what they want to teach, and the learning outcomes are just something they ignore really, or try to"

(Mary)

A third point is that most academic staff simply do not get much exposure to the course design process. The development of new courses is an infrequent event in most academic departments, and systematic reviews of existing courses take place just once every five or six years. This means that the level of experience is often very limited, as noted by one Assistant Head of Department:

"… a course leader is going to go through this process once every five years and quite often may not have been the course leader the time before. You're starting from scratch every single time."

(Jeremy)

Jeremy suggests that course leaders could gain more understanding by shadowing another course leader going through the review process in advance of their own pocess. He also suggests that academic staff could develop their appreciation of the importance of course design by contributing to committees and sitting on validation panels. However, he does acknowledge that the time required for such activities inevitably limits the take-up of such opportunities.

A fourth explanatory point to emerge was the problem of poor communication. There was quite a strong view from several respondents that communication in relation to the course design process was actually quite poor. Despite having all the necessary supporting frameworks in place, and procedures clearly mapped out, there was a perception that something was failing on the communication front. One

quality assurance manager felt that the root of the problem lay in a failure to get the message across about the reasons for doing things in a certain way:

> *"I think we're particularly bad …on stuff about course design and why we want to do things. It's just a kind of 'you just need to do this now' approach"*
>
> (Roberta)

Finally, the most damning indictment of the lack of understanding of the course design process came from a Head of Quality Assurance, who had experience of several institutions. When asked how the course design process works, his response was simply that "it doesn't". When pressed, he explained his view, based on his experience of reading the course documentation and sitting on validation panels for hundreds of courses. He felt that the course design process was disjointed and lacked coherence, and offered this frank assessment:

> *"…we get a course that is very traditionally put together. And I suspect it's through some kind of osmosis approach where everybody goes 'well, we need some modules - they need some learning outcomes - they need some assessments - and then - oh bugger - we need some course learning outcomes. Right, let's see what we can pull together. Oh - there's a course!'. It's almost like a happy accident, rather than anything that has been thought through from a course perspective."*
>
> (Ewan)

This quote goes right to the heart of one of the key challenges in course design, which is the apparent difficulty of adopting a holistic approach. The consequence of a failure to address this problem is a fragmented course made up of a collection of individual modules, rather than a coherent course designed in an integrated manner.

Community

In order to identify the members of the community, Garraway (2011) suggests that we need to look for those actors other than the subject who share an interest in working on the object to produce a desired outcome. Marken (2006) proposes that the community represents the stakeholders in the system who provide a context for the work being done by the subject. By looking at the community we can, as Mwanza (2002) notes, locate the analysis of the activity within a social and cultural context.

In my activity system the course team (subject) operates within a university community, but we need to identify those members of the community who exert some influence over the course design process. All the interviewees in the study identified a similar range of parties contributing to the course design process alongside the course team. The primary members of the community to emerge from the interviews as having a significant role were the quality assurance team, educational developers, senior academic managers and students. There was a recognition that, whilst all parties will generally claim that their objective is to produce a high-quality course with a good student experience, in practice their priorities will vary. The primary parties are identified in Figure 19 below, and the nature of their respective contributions is discussed in the subsequent text.

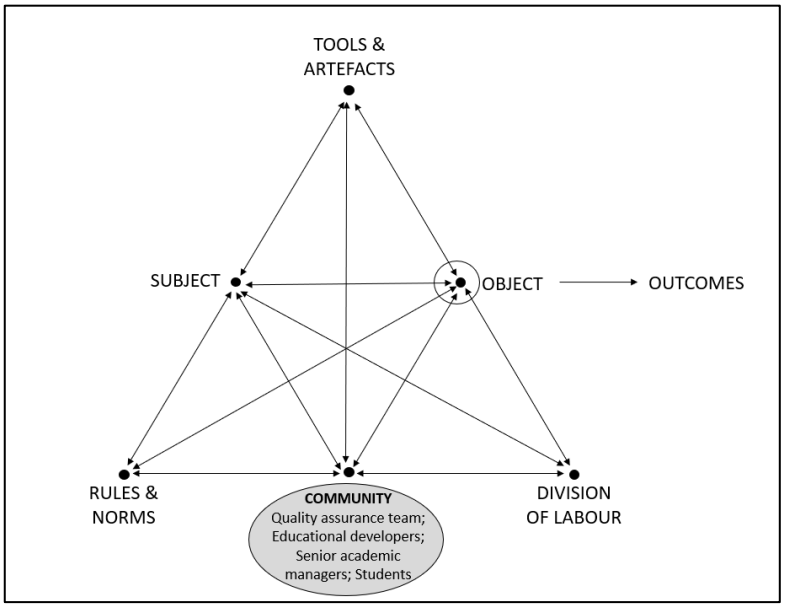

Figure 19: Activity system with Community component highlighted

Without exception, every interviewee recognised the central role of a university's quality assurance team. I will examine the impact of quality assurance itself under 'Rules and Norms' below, but here I will consider how the quality assurance team are perceived within the community. Perceptions varied according to the nature of the interactions that interviewees had had with the team and where quality assurance was located within the institution. Amongst educational developers and those with an institution-wide learning and teaching role, perceptions seemed to range from broadly negative to ambivalent. One senior member of staff expressed his frustration with the quality assurance team's response to a university-wide curriculum reform initiative:

> *"… the quality unit was a major hurdle. They should not be called the quality unit, they should be called the compliance unit. They don't do quality. We do quality. They do compliance. They tick boxes, they look at regulations and ensure compliance with regulations. So it's been most frustrating…"*

(Mateo)

An alternative viewpoint at another institution saw quality assurance as being closely aligned with quality enhancement, and highlighted the need to promote a more positive perception:

> *"So there's a people challenge here as well, around shifting people's culture away from QA, towards QE, and towards the teaching and learning aspect, because people still see the processes as hoops to jump through…"*
>
> (Beth)

Course leaders and senior academic staff, by and large, acknowledged the need for a team to administer the formal procedures of the quality assurance system. Most staff did not hold any personal antipathy towards quality assurance colleagues, and in many cases they valued the guidance provided by staff. There were nevertheless undertones in some of the responses which were suggestive of a degree of scepticism:

> *"You feel as though… (you're) having wrists slapped and told off when you haven't got your learning outcomes right…"*
>
> (Mary)

> *"… they're perceived to be a 'computer says no' type of type of approach.."*
>
> (Jeremy)

Staff working in quality assurance themselves recognised these perceptions and highlighted how difficult it can be to work with course teams when these sceptical attitudes are present. They were keen to stress their desire to work in partnership with course teams from an early stage in the process to improve courses by

contributing their expertise relating to both the University's regulations and external regulatory frameworks.

> *"… you create tensions there where people just say, 'well Quality say no', but actually we've just got an awful lot of knowledge in Quality … because we get involved with everything…"*
>
> (Roberta)

Educational developers also voiced concerns about the way in which they themselves were perceived by colleagues in their institutions and the difficulty they had in exerting meaningful influence over the course design process. They often felt under-valued and under-resourced and had to face scepticism from course team members who did not recognise the contribution they could make to the process. The way such units are constituted can also have a significant impact on the way they are perceived by course teams. In some universities the educational development team may be closely aligned with the quality assurance team, in an attempt to bring quality assurance and quality enhancement together within a single management structure. However, this can result in educational developers being perceived as part of the 'quality' team. One educational developer at a 1960s university bemoaned the way his team was viewed by academic colleagues:

> *"… it's partly the way I think the process is viewed within the academic schools … if they come to teams like my colleagues here, it's more guidance through the QA processes and help with the paperwork and setting meetings - they don't naturally seem to come to the central teams for pedagogic support."*
>
> (Andrew)

As noted previously, the size and influence of educational development teams varied from one institution to another. Most teams had responsibilities which extended far

beyond curriculum design and included teaching qualification courses, routes to professional recognition, academic staff development and providing advice on teaching-related matters. The names of such teams vary, as did the titles of the staff employed therein. The term 'educational development' has been used here generically to refer to the work of such teams, but alternative terms included academic development and academic practice. A key feature that was common to all educational development teams was an acknowledgement that they existed to provide advice on pedagogical matters, but subject expertise must lie with the course team. This can result in some academic staff being somewhat sceptical of the value of educational developers whom they perceive to be telling them how to teach their subject.

Interviewees referred to senior academic staff in management positions as having a significant role in the course design process. Role titles differed from one university to another, but typically the references were to positions such as Head of Department, Head of School, or Dean of Faculty, together with Assistant Heads, Associate Deans and so on. The holders of such roles had line management responsibility and control of a budget.

Responses from educational developers and those with institution-wide responsibility for learning and teaching simply acknowledged that the priorities of those in management positions are likely to be different from those in course teams, and this can have implications for decisions that affect the course design process. Specific references were made to issues such as the market viability of a course, and the pressure to improve metrics such as those for the National Student Survey.

The relative differences in priorities between academic managers and course teams has already been highlighted above as a potential source of tension, but there was no unanimity amongst course leaders as to the nature of the management involvement in course design. Whilst some course leaders felt that their managers were concerned primarily with revenues and performance metrics, others recognised the positive impact that they can have. One course leader spoke in glowing terms about the contribution of the Head of Department in driving reflection on the curriculum and supporting staff who were championing change.

As courses are designed to meet the needs of students it is not surprising that virtually all interviewees acknowledged that students themselves should be involved in the process. However, when probed on the nature of that involvement it became apparent that in many institutions it was fairly limited. In some cases, the involvement of students might best be described as tokenistic, whereby a consultation process takes place with students. This may be through direct discussions with student representatives or by raising the matter at a committee or board on which students sit. There were examples where representatives from the student union had a formal role on validation panels, giving them direct influence over the course approval process. However, in all institutions there was an acknowledgement of the difficulty of getting meaningful input from students. One educational developer appeared to imply that involving students was necessary, but they did not have the required expertise:

"… you need experts in pedagogical design, you need the experts with regards to the quality processes… we need to be compliant - you do need to have student representatives, but it can only go so far."

(Charlotte)

Where students have more extensive involvement there was a range of views about the value of this. In some cases, it was viewed as simply paying 'lip service' to the idea of working in partnership with students. On the other hand, a quality manager with extensive experience of validation panels noted that student panel members had made genuinely valuable contributions to the course approval process, particularly during the panel meetings with the course team:

"… we've had student panel members and I've thought they've been amazing. … to get them to ask those tough questions, I found a little bit more powerful"

(Roberta)

The student representatives who were interviewed, both of whom sat on validation panels, acknowledged the challenges they face. They endeavour to look at course proposals from a student's perspective but more often than not, the course will be in a subject that they know little or nothing about, and they will not feel confident in challenging the pedagogic principles. Nevertheless, even raising concerns about the variety of assessment types, or the way in which employability is embedded in the course, can send a signal to course teams:

"So, us sitting in those panels is very beneficial in helping them understand that this is very important, just as much as the other people that are sitting here … understanding the student voice is really important here"

(Ruksana)

It was evident that no institution had formal arrangements to involve students in the detailed course design process. Views on whether such an approach would be appropriate were varied. Not surprisingly, those who represented the student voice felt that this would be a positive development, and that course teams miss out on an opportunity by not involving students. One comment suggested that even though students may not have an understanding of curriculum design, they generally appreciate where they are now and where they would like to be by the end of their course, so they can offer helpful advice. Whilst some course leaders were sceptical about the value of involving students, others saw the potential:

> *"I'm not going to ask students (about the subject) - but I might ask them how they find it when they work with (subject) texts, or I might ask them 'Is it helpful if I lecture for 45 minutes at the beginning of the class?'"*
>
> (Meg)

> *"… they can spot blind spots you don't spot, and they know how they learn, and they know how they engage, so I do think that that is really valuable."*
>
> (Luke)

The difficulties of involving students in a meaningful way were certainly recognised. There were concerns about the feasibility of allowing significant input from students if it raised their expectations as to what was possible within the constraints of the curriculum. Another problem that was mentioned is that sufficient time is never allowed for course teams to engage students effectively in the course design process, so it invariably becomes rushed when academic staff realise that they need to be able to demonstrate that they have consulted students. A Head of Quality Assurance

suggested that we simply do not understand what it is that we are expecting from students:

> *"… I don't think we have equipped course teams with the tools … to know how to talk to students about what's in their course."*
>
> (Ewan)

Other parties within universities that are part of the community and were mentioned by interviewees included library staff, learning technologists, careers service staff and technicians. It was clear that course teams were highly appreciative of colleagues in such roles, but their contribution specifically to the course design process did not really emerge as a significant theme.

There were several references to the role of validation panels that have a university responsibility to approve courses at the end of the design process. Typically, such panels are made up of experienced academic staff from across the university, together with quality assurance staff, one or two academics from other institutions and representation from industry or professional bodies. Students may also sit on such panels. Although panel members are not directly involved in the course design process, it was apparent that course teams saw the panel scrutiny of the course as the final hurdle in the process. One course leader acknowledged the importance of having panel members from outside the discipline but expressed disappointment at what he perceived as a lack of any attempt to understand the particular needs of a discipline. An external member of a validation panel nevertheless sought to emphasise the critical role that panels play, both in upholding academic rigour and

contributing positively when courses are rejected or when they are approved subject to conditions:

> *"… where we have sent programmes back for significant changes… I think the staff have benefited from that and … they seem to be more confident…"*
>
> (Hilary)

Most interviewees also mentioned professional bodies, employers and industry representatives as stakeholders in the course design process. Where courses were professionally accredited, the requirements of the professional body were obviously incorporated into the course, but the direct involvement of personnel from the professional body was generally limited. Some professional bodies insist on being involved in the validation process, but this was quite rare. It was evident that virtually all course teams consulted employers during the process and in at least one case there was a formal university requirement that this took place right at the start to establish an employability framework for the course. Employers or industry representatives also often sit on validation panels to provide an external perspective to the course approval process. Whilst professional bodies, employers and industry representatives can certainly be considered as stakeholders, it is questionable whether they can truly be considered as part of the community. Their involvement tends to be in the form of laying down rules or setting expectations, and as such they would be better considered under the 'Rules and Norms' component.

Rules and norms

As Marken (2006) indicates, this component includes formal written requirements and regulations, but also includes the unwritten norms that govern behaviour. Rules

both constrain and justify what the subject can do when using tools and artefacts to act on the object, and will affect how the community engages with the subject to contribute to the activity system. The interviews revealed a range of rules and norms that influence the actions of the subject and the wider community. The most significant of these were quality assurance requirements, professional body requirements, expectations associated with employability, and those associated with the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework. In addition, to a limited extent, institutional culture can exert some influence. These factors are highlighted graphically in Figure 20 below, and then examined in detail in the subsequent text.

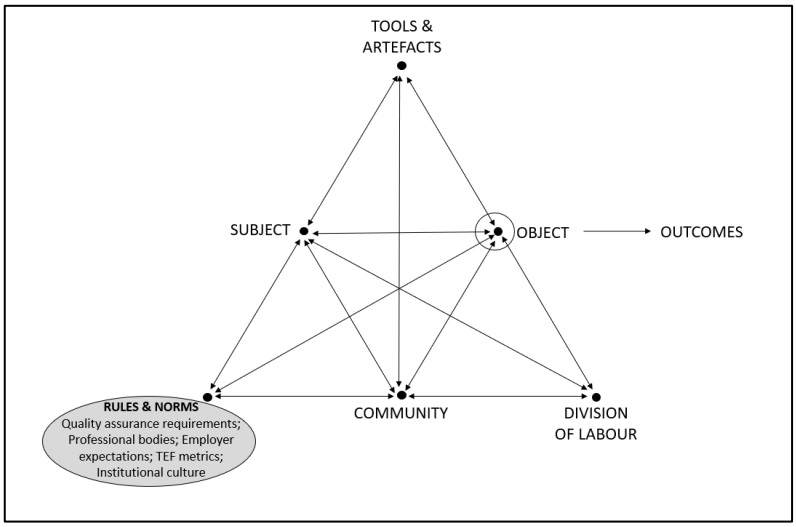

Figure 20: Activity system with Rules & Norms component highlighted

Undoubtedly, the most prominent issue to emerge from the interviews under the category of rules and norms related to the influence of quality assurance systems in the course design process. There was acknowledgement of the expectations of the Quality Assurance Agency as set out in the 'UK Quality Code for Higher Education' (QAA, 2018a). In addition, the QAA also publishes Subject Benchmark Statements covering all subject areas for which degree courses are offered. These documents are

individual to each subject area and provide guidance on the subject-specific knowledge and understanding which should be included in programmes, as well as the generic skills that should be incorporated and the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that might be adopted (QAA, 2020).

Generally speaking, compliance with QAA requirements and the need to comply with a University's academic regulations were taken as a given and were not seen as contentious. However, the broader issue of the role of quality assurance prompted several interesting viewpoints. Some of the themes that emerged have already been touched on in the 'Community' section when I examined how the quality assurance team were perceived within the community. Here, my focus will be on the influence of quality assurance arrangements on the process itself.

Interviewees acknowledged the need for quality assurance in the course design process to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements, to maintain standards, and to establish parity and consistency across the institution and with the wider sector. What was more interesting though, was the extent to which some course teams seem to equate compliance with quality assurance procedures with course design itself. In such circumstances, there is a disproportionate focus on producing the documentation in an appropriate format for a validation panel, as opposed to a creative process in which the focus is on innovation and the student experience. A Quality Assurance Manager indicated that many course teams viewed the process as:

> *"… paperwork based … rather than actually thinking about what you want to do, it's like 'we need a programme spec, we need this, we need some modules'…"*

(Roberta)

A Head of Learning and Teaching expressed his disappointment at having established a comprehensive infrastructure to support course teams in the design process, only for academic staff to appear more concerned with preparing the documentation. He acknowledged that academic staff in his institution were very busy and had large teaching loads, but he was clearly frustrated with staff who attended course design workshops and were asking for help with documentation:

> *"That is the most annoying thing that happens … yes, we can help you with the paperwork offline … but this is the creative part. This is the bit where you have to shine. This is not about satisfying the quality unit. We can do that separately."*

(Mateo)

The disproportionate focus on the 'rules' of the quality assurance system can have an adverse impact on innovation in the curriculum. A course leader summarises her perception:

> *"… I very much feel as though the rules stifle the creative process. In a way the templates are a necessary evil, but you could probably fit most kinds of ways of organising the learning into whatever template a university has - you know - it's just the way that you write the document."*

(Mary)

Mary's view was not untypical of the perceptions of course leaders, several of whom referred to rules which they saw as being 'imposed' on them by 'the centre'. Such rules relate to things such as teaching contact hours, the number of assessments in a module, or word counts for assessments, all of which may be viewed as a constraint on course teams that may wish to adopt more flexible modes of delivery or

assessment. It was also notable that timescales were invariably dictated by quality assurance rules and procedures, both in terms of the period between reviews of courses, and the deadlines for submission of course documentation. Whilst acknowledging the need for such timescales, it was apparent that course teams often struggled to meet the deadlines when there were so many other competing priorities.

Beyond quality assurance requirements, there was one further significant source of rules that came up regularly in the interviews, namely professional bodies. If a course is professionally accredited, additional rules may be imposed by the accrediting body. The extent of the influence which such bodies have on the curriculum design process varies considerably. Some are highly prescriptive, particularly in terms of course content, admissions policies, the expertise of the course team, modes of assessment and many other issues. Others adopt a much lighter touch and encourage higher education institutions to develop innovative approaches to the delivery of courses. Accreditation is highly prized, particularly in professional fields where an accredited degree is a prerequisite to practice, so such requirements can impose a further constraint on the course design. This was widely recognised by interviewees:

> *"… if your course has a professional body, I think they're highly influential in shaping the curriculum."*
>
> (Abigail)

An interesting point to emerge amongst the educational developers and those with institution-wide responsibility for learning and teaching, was the suggestion that some course teams use professional accreditation as a shield against institutional

initiatives. I referred in the section on Tools and Artefacts above to a trend in many institutions for introducing curriculum frameworks which set out broad principles for the development of all courses. Some course teams have sought to exempt themselves from such frameworks by hiding behind the requirements of a professional body. It was acknowledged that the accreditation demands of some professional bodies are very rigorous, but views also indicated that most professional bodies are very forward thinking and open to innovation in course design and assessment approaches:

> *"… there's a lot of smoke and mirrors around professional body accreditation."*
>
> (Beth)

> *"… show me one professional body that says, you know, teach it the old way, the old style, and just examine them to death."*
>
> (Hazel)

Alongside professional body requirements, most interviewees made reference either to the demands of employers or the expectation that graduates are employable. Employability cannot necessarily be codified as a formal set of rules, but it has become such a prominent feature of higher education discourse that it can be considered a societal expectation. This was certainly evident from the interviews, where all parties, be they educational developers, course leaders, management or students, referred to the importance of courses preparing students for the workplace.

Course teams have responded to these expectations in various ways. Firstly, it would seem that most course teams routinely consult employers as part of the course design process. In one example, this involves holding a formal employer event at the start of the process to get employer input. Secondly, course teams are embedding employability into their curricula by seeking to ensure that learning outcomes are explicitly designed to develop work-related skills and attributes. Whilst such practices have historically been commonplace in courses that are aligned with particular professions, it was notable that course leaders from more traditional fields in the arts and humanities also considered this to be essential. One course leader in the humanities acknowledged the challenge this presented:

> *"… one of the great skills and also challenges of curriculum design is to take the various aspects of that process - graduates skills and employability on the one hand, subject knowledge on another, and maybe other skills that are more to do with cultural capital and student engagement and participation, and make sure those things can be complementary."*
>
> (Luke)

The issue of employability also came up in the context of discussions about the broader purpose of higher education, particularly because the regulatory framework is couched in terms that emphasise the importance of preparation for work. Alongside this, graduate employment is one of the metrics that contributes to the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), along with student satisfaction and student continuation within a course. TEF ratings are a widely used gauge in ranking universities, and they also have a significant influence on a university's position in league tables. It is therefore inevitable that university

managers will attach a lot of importance to activities which have the potential to improve TEF ratings.

> *"… the overriding driver for employability recently has been the weighting it's got on the TEF … schools have realised that they're going to get downgraded if they haven't got that in … it seems to be the real driver …"*
>
> (William)

As a consequence, the TEF has a direct influence on the course design process by effectively imposing an additional set of expectations on course teams. A poor TEF rating can prompt demands from management to design a course that produces better graduate employment outcomes and improved student satisfaction.

The rules and norms discussed so far have applied in a more or less similar way to all universities in the study. The literature suggests that, in addition to formal, codified rules, there are cultural norms that influence the activity system.

Traditionally, the tribal nature of an academic discipline was seen as conditioning the values and behaviour of academics (Becher, 1989). Such norms of behaviour would carry with them the historically accumulated 'baggage' of many years' academic practice. The interviews certainly suggested that the discipline can have a significant impact on the curriculum. However, the focus amongst course leaders in this regard tended to be on the content of the courses, epistemological differences and academic identity rather than any differences in the way in which course design is undertaken. One educational developer referred to engineering course teams adopting a very methodical, planned approach, in contrast to arts-based disciplines adopting a much more open-ended, free-flowing approach. However, across the

interviews as a whole there was no significant evidence to indicate a correlation between the disciplines and particular approaches. Th main influence of the discipline seemed to be in contributing to the fragmentation of the curriculum as a result of staff focusing on their own modules at the expense of course coherence. This issue has already been addressed earlier in the chapter.

The literature also suggests that institutional culture can have an impact on behavioural norms, and therefore on course design. Staff do not have a formal duty to comply with these norms, but anyone deviating might be viewed as an outsider. Most interviewees in this study could not define the culture that existed at their own institution, though they were able to distinguish their own institution from others. The distinctions cited included the age and pedigree of the institution, the balance between managerialism and academic freedom, and the relative emphasis on teaching or research.

Whilst institutional culture may influence attitudes and behaviours, there was limited evidence from the interviews to suggest a direct impact on course design. The only factor that did seem to have an impact was that at older, research-intensive universities, there seemed to be an acknowledgement that the culture was largely driven by research, and this took priority over everything:

> *"… our institutional identity has been for so long … about research … maybe it's the size of an institution and its history, there is a lot of culture that is about research."*
>
> (Abigail)

The influence of this emphasis on research will be examined in further detail in the section on 'Division of Labour' below.

Division of Labour

In very simple terms, consideration of the division of labour requires us to ask who is responsible for what in course design, and how are the various roles organised (Mwanza, 2002). At a basic level this refers to a horizontal division of responsibilities, referring to the way in which the tasks involved in course design are allocated amongst members of the community. However, the notion of division of labour also refers to the vertical division of power. In particular, the way in which power is exercised through the allocation of workloads evoked the most significant responses from interviewees, both in terms of the time allocated to curriculum development, and the perceived value attached to research activity in comparison to teaching-related activity. These issues are highlighted in Figure 21 below, and considered in detail in the subsequent text.

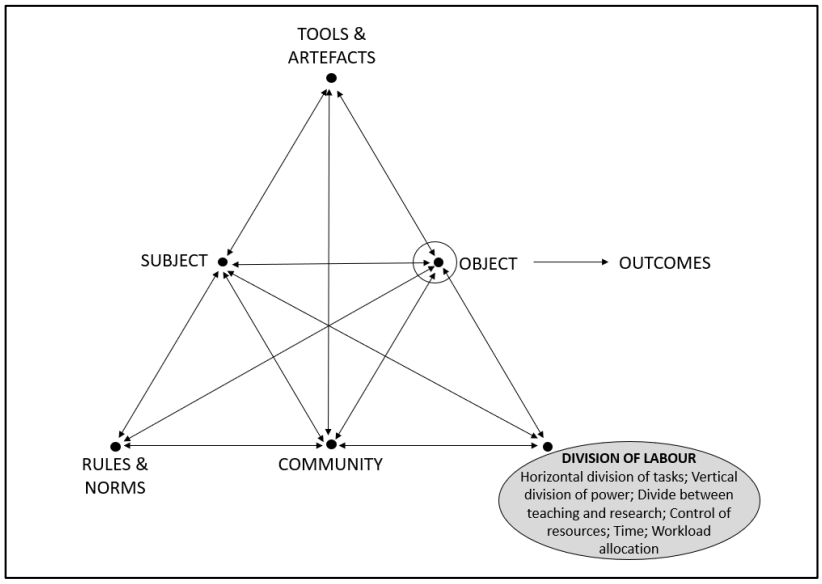

Figure 21: Activity system with Division of Labour component highlighted

The horizontal division of labour is relatively uncontentious in the context of course design. The responsibility for various aspects of the process is broadly similar from one institution to another. As I have already explained in earlier sections, the course team has the primary responsibility for designing the course, often with support from educational developers and quality assurance colleagues, each of whom have quite specific roles to play.

A significant issue that emerged at several institutions related to the fact that most academic staff are employed both to teach and to undertake research. It is clear that for many academics, and indeed their managers, the competing priorities of these two activities can present a challenge. For the institutions in this study it was acknowledged that the bulk of their income comes from tuition fees, so it would not be unreasonable to assume that teaching and associated activities, including course design, would take priority. However, the evidence from the interviews suggests that there is still a widespread perception amongst academics that research is a more prestigious activity and is more likely to lead to career progression. This is particularly the case at older, research-intensive universities, as indicated by an interviewee at a Russell Group university:

> *"… in a research-intensive institution there's always a perception on the academic side … that research comes first, and in some cases, that teaching gets in the way."*
>
> (Gabriel)

This clearly has significant implications for course design. If the staff who have the primary responsibility for developing a course are prioritising their research, there is a strong likelihood that the course will not receive the attention that is required. The

implication of several responses on this issue was that the best way of counteracting this problem is to have clear leadership on the issue, at university-level and at the level of faculty, school or department. In effect, this is concerned with the division and exercise of power.

At an institutional and faculty level, power lies predominantly in the hands of the senior management team, including the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors and Deans, though titles vary from one institution to another. Clearly the senior management should ensure that all the university's core activities are adequately resourced, but their actions invariably transmit signals to staff across the institution. If all the senior academic managers are perceived to have achieved their status as a result of their research record, or the policies they promote appear to prioritise research, then this obviously conveys a signal. On the other hand, teaching and associated activities can be given a higher profile within an institution when members of the senior management team provide clear leadership. This leadership has to effectively direct middle managers such as Heads of Schools or Departments to take something seriously.

> *"… the leadership, I think it's really important. If you have PVC, who says, 'Yeah, I'm really convinced about this, we're going to go for it'."*
>
> (Oliver)

At School or Departmental level, power is primarily exercised through control over access to resources. Given that salary scales at universities are negotiated nationally, and there are generally no provisions for bonuses, the main tool that Heads of Schools or Departments have is workload allocation. An independent report in 2018

(Athena Forum, 2018) found that most higher education institutions in the UK operate some form of workload allocation model (WAM), and every university in this study certainly had some such model. These typically use notional 'hours allocations' for different responsibilities such as teaching, research, scholarship, and administrative duties such as course leadership, admissions, marketing, committee work and so on. Amongst all interviewees, regardless of institution, role or seniority, views on these workload models were predominantly negative. It was recognised that such models were introduced as a means of ensuring that activities were adequately resourced and workloads were fair. However, there was a strong sense that the models were having a counterproductive impact whereby academic staff were reluctant to do anything unless they received an appropriate allocation of hours for it. This was perceived as undermining a collegial culture within Schools and Departments:

> *"What it's become is a transactional model, where people go, 'I can't do something unless'. It's turned on its head. It's become something that it wasn't created to do…"*
>
> (Beth)

> *"I have far too many conversations with people who say, 'but is it in my WAM? Because if it's not in my WAM I'm not doing it'."*
>
> (Harriet)

When a new course has to be designed, or an existing course has to be reviewed, the workload can be significant. Unless there is an adequate time allocation to cover the work involved, then course leaders and team members will invariably have to juggle other competing priorities alongside the demands of the course design. This was by

far the biggest concern raised in the interviews, with the general view being that the time required for course design was never sufficiently recognised by the model. Whilst all workload models incorporated provision for course leadership, most did not make any specific provision for the additional work required to design a new course or to review an existing course. In some institutions this was at the discretion of a Head of School or Department, but there were clear inconsistencies both between and within institutions.

Several course leaders complained that allocations for course leadership barely covered the normal role, let alone the additional work associated with course design. A fairly typical view amongst course leaders was that work on curriculum development has to be done alongside other responsibilities including teaching, research and administration.

> *"… our time is increasingly squeezed. And then, when things like revalidation happen on top of that, there's a lot of extra time that goes into filling all the forms and, you know, meeting all the quality and standards stuff … but that means that conversations about curriculum design and creativity and all of those things have to come in your own time."*
>
> (Luke)

Whilst one might not be surprised to hear course leaders make this point, it was notable that the issue was also commented on by managers, educational developers, quality assurance staff and senior staff. There was widespread acknowledgement of the problem but no real suggestions as to how this might be resolved. One senior academic referred back to a time earlier in his career when staff would be relieved of other duties to focus on a course review, but seemed to imply that there was no

possibility of this happening in the current climate:

> *"… back in the good old days if you were going through a validation and it was a big one, you could almost guarantee that you would be bought out of something you were doing already, you would be given the space to do it … But that just would not happen now."*
>
> (Jeremy)

All interviewees who had some direct involvement in the course design process pointed to lack of time as the main challenge. In the view of several interviewees, when course teams are faced with such time pressures it is not surprising that they often ignore the opportunities for creative course design and focus instead on simply meeting the quality assurance deadlines.

Notwithstanding the general agreement amongst interviewees as to the challenge of time, there was a highly pertinent comment from one Head of Learning and Teaching with experience at several different institutions. She suggested that presenting the problem as a lack of time overlooked a deeper and much more fundamental issue. She acknowledged that academics have many different responsibilities and competing calls on their time, but claimed that it is really a question of priorities:

> *So, time is the one that everybody talks about. And actually, it might just be that everything's important, but which one are you prepared to prioritise and give the time to? … So actually, when people talk about time, it's not necessarily time they're talking about - its prioritising - which comes down to what do I value, what are my priorities, what are my team's priorities, who's telling me to do it?*
>
> (Beth)

Summary

The themes that have emerged from the interviews are summarised graphically in Figure 22 below. Whilst the themes may be interesting individually, the value of the activity systems analysis is that it enables us to consider the issues holistically.

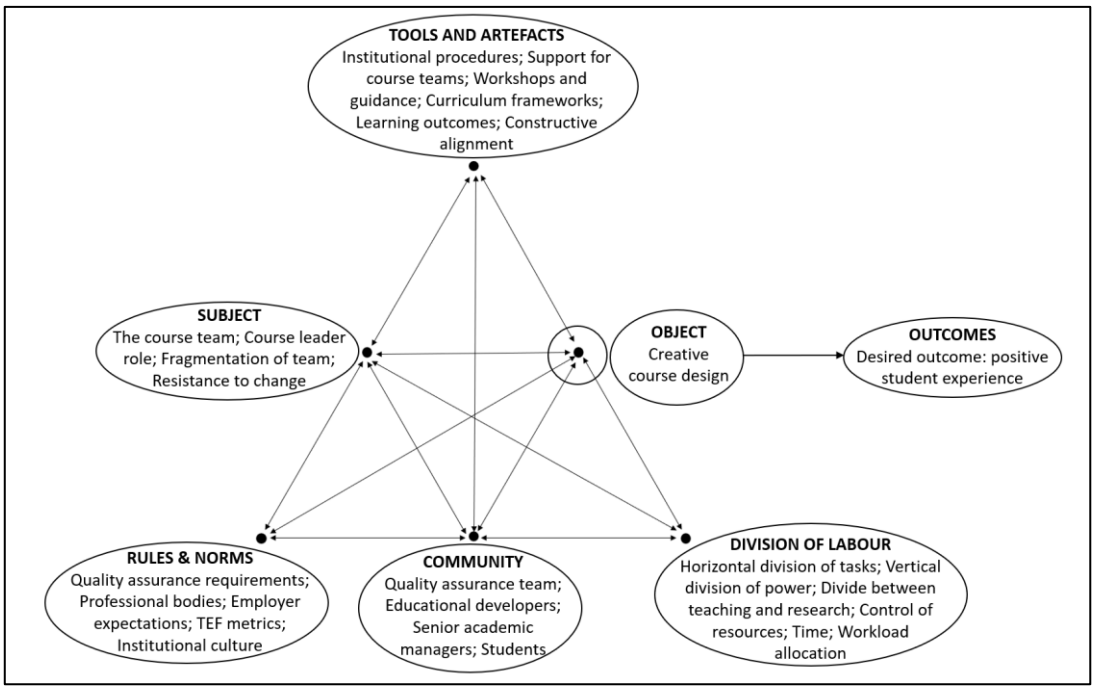

Figure 22: Activity system for curriculum development with key themes from interviews summarised

In the next chapter I will discuss how these various themes relate to one another, and specifically how those relationships create inherent tension within the activity system.

Chapter 6: DISCUSSION BASED ON TENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

In this chapter I will identify the tensions inherent in the curriculum development process by using the activity system framework to highlight them. As noted in Chapter 3, Engeström (2001) uses the word 'contradictions' to refer to the structural tensions in activity systems and other authors have used terms such as 'imbalances' (Kuutti, 1996) or 'disturbances' (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2014). For simplicity here, I prefer to use the word 'tension', because I am particularly interested in the stresses present within the system when values, objectives, rules or procedures that exist within the system are in opposition to one another.

In discussing the tensions, I must emphasise that, whilst they may appear as a series of individual issues, it is important that they are not considered in isolation. To derive benefit from the activity systems analysis it is essential to understand individual activities in relation to their context (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

Simply identifying structural tensions within an activity system is not in itself helpful. The disturbances revealed by tensions within an activity system can be seen as sources of change (Engeström, 2008) and provide opportunities for solutions (Foot, 2014). Rather than viewing the tensions simply as problems, they should be seen as starting points for developmental learning (Garraway, 2011). Having identified the tensions, I will also consider the implications of their presence within the activity system, and the opportunities for developmental learning.

Tensions and their implications

I referred in Chapter 3 to a fundamental contradiction that exists in activity systems between the use value and exchange value of commodities (Engeström, 2008). The example cited was a doctor providing a healthcare service to patients but also working within a socioeconomic system where this service is exchanged for financial compensation. This potentially creates a systemic tension between the dual objects of promoting health whilst seeking to generate and increase revenues. In the current, marketised higher education system in England, a similar tension exists. Williams (2011) claims that higher education institutions are resourced in relation to the "quasi-market exchange value" (p.280) of the services they provide, whilst academic staff within universities tend to be motivated by a desire to develop students' understanding of a subject. Thus, course team members may be deeply committed to designing a course in which students have an outstanding learning experience whilst achieving the learning outcomes of the course. They may take the view that this can only be effectively achieved if class sizes are limited and students have access to particular resources. However, the course team members work at a university to earn their living, and the senior management of the university may see an opportunity to increase the revenue of the university by recruiting more students to the course, and this could impact on the experience of the students and their access to resources.

On the basis of the evidence from the interviews, this fundamental tension appears to be inherent in the curriculum development activity system and lies at the root of other more explicit tensions within and between components of the system. It is

clear from the literature that the higher education system in England has become increasingly marketised, with a regulatory framework that demands value for money and a consumerist ethos amongst students. This in turn has resulted in an increasingly managerialist culture within institutions, in which managers are driven to seek improvements in public metrics relating to student satisfaction and graduate outcomes. To achieve these improvements, performativity measures are introduced in an effort to manage the activities of academic staff and thereby exercise some control over their activities. Equally, the evidence suggests that increasing the revenues of an institution is generally not the primary motivation for academics.

The interview findings provide ample evidence to reinforce the themes that emerged from the literature, and to show the existence of this tension in universities. It was acknowledged that course team members generally have an enthusiasm for their subject and are concerned to ensure that they convey this enthusiasm to their students. Academic managers, whilst recognising the importance of the student experience, were also concerned with ensuring that courses generated sufficient revenues to sustain departments. Whilst these two objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the relative priority attached to one or the other by different participants in the activity system is an inevitable source of tension. This might be thought of as a primary tension existing within the object of the activity system.

It is somewhat simplistic to present this tension purely in terms of different priorities, with course team members being driven by a love of their subject and academic managers being more concerned with 'balancing the books'. To do so risks underestimating the significance of the implications, which can be serious when the

different perceptions fester beneath the surface rather than being discussed openly. Thus, there may be feelings of resentment amongst academic staff who assume that their managers are only interested in courses that generate income for the institution. The academic managers, on the other hand, may feel that their motivations are misunderstood, when they are seeking to ensure the viability of the courses offered in order to preserve jobs and ensure the ongoing success of the School or Department. This tension should serve as a catalyst for open discussions about the object of curriculum development. The discussions should bring to the surface the different perspectives and help to develop a shared understanding.

I have presented the object of the activity system as being the design of the course, and I have particularly emphasised the importance of creativity. Whilst the interviews revealed variations in the perceptions of the object amongst different participants in the activity system, the idea of creativity was generally regarded as positive in course design. However, it was also apparent that there was a tension between the object and the rules and norms of the activity system. This manifested itself in the views expressed by course leaders and educational developers that the quality assurance requirements relating to course design can have the effect of stifling creativity in the process. Such views are also to be found in the literature, and indeed I cited several sources that highlighted perceptions of bureaucratic procedures inhibiting innovation (Ferrell, 2011), a disproportionate focus on documentation and timescales (Beetham, 2009), and a quality assurance system intent on intrusive micromanagement (Brady and Bates, 2016).

Whilst there was general acknowledgement in the interviews that quality assurance was an essential part of the curriculum development process, there was a certain scepticism, particularly amongst academic staff, as to the intrinsic value of requirements imposed. More significantly, when course teams have many competing demands on their time there is a risk that course design is reduced to a 'box-ticking' exercise. In the absence of a real determination to use the course design process to be innovative, the process may default to one that is driven by documentation and procedures. Thus, there can be a disproportionate focus on completing course document templates, meeting the perceived expectations of validation panels, and complying with timescales set by quality assurance procedures.

Whilst professional development could contribute to addressing this, it may require a more fundamental review of institutional procedures to foster more effective working practices. For the most part, there is mutual respect between academic staff and quality assurance staff, so the procedures need to be designed to integrate their respective expertise without hampering creativity.

Although I maintain that this systemic tension exists between the object in the form of creative course design, and the rules and norms in the form of quality assurance requirements, it might also be possible to conceive of this in terms of a tension between the subject and the community. I am referring here to the potential tensions that exist between different participants in the activity system. One might expect the tension to manifest itself in the relationship between the course team (the subject) and the staff responsible for quality assurance (members of the community). However, by and large, this did not seem to be the case, and with one

or two exceptions, the interviews suggested that a good deal of mutual respect existed between academic staff and colleagues in quality assurance. Similarly, course teams' relationships with other members of the community such as educational developers and academic managers, was generally respectful. Whilst some personal tensions are inevitable in any large organisation, they do not appear to be inherent. Where tensions do exist, they are more likely to be structural, and they exist within and between components of the activity system, rather than being derived from any personal animosity.

Another key group within the community that course teams have a direct relationship with is the students. Given the fact that the activity system effectively exists to create a positive experience for students, one might expect them to be a source of some tensions within the system. The literature highlighted a trend in higher education for student partnership initiatives, including examples where attempts had been made to engage students directly in curriculum design. There was some evidence in the literature of a reluctance amongst academic staff to cede control of their modules to students, but the interviews did not reveal any specific indicators of this reluctance. In fact, there seemed to be a willingness to engage with students, but one of the interesting issues to emerge was that there appears to be a lack of knowledge of how to do this effectively. Consequently, student involvement is often somewhat tokenistic and tends to be based on consultation rather than genuine partnership. Furthermore, even amongst students themselves there did not seem to be a clear view as to what exactly their role should be in the process. One might argue that this phenomenon is not, strictly speaking, a tension, given that

course teams are open to the idea of involving students. However, the lack of awareness of how to do this has the effect of generating a certain anxiety about the control of the course design process, and therein lies the tension.

The implication of this is that opportunities can be missed to forge genuine partnerships with students and to benefit from their insights and perceptions in the course design process. To address the issue of paying 'lip service' to student involvement, it would be important to articulate clearly the objective of involving students in course design. There seems little point in simply consulting students without being clear about the extent and nature of the contribution that is expected of them. This in turn will require a much deeper understanding of the concept of student partnerships amongst all members of the community, including the students themselves.

The interview findings made it clear that the course team, and especially the course leader, sit at the heart of the curriculum development process. Admittedly, this is to be expected in a study where the course team is identified as the 'subject', but it was striking in the interviews just how much focus there was on the behaviours and attitudes of the course team and the course leader. This aligns with themes that emerged from the literature, particularly in relation to the level at which the culture of learning and teaching is established (Knight and Trowler, 2000), and the teaching and learning regimes that exist at this level (Trowler and Cooper, 2002; Trowler, 2005). It is inevitable that tensions in the activity system will often centre on the course team – both within the team, and between the team and other components of the activity system.

Within course teams, a tension was evident between the need for course-level design that produces a coherent programme of study, and the tendency of individual academic staff to focus on module-level design issues. In the literature review I highlighted the fact that many sources do not clearly differentiate between design at different levels. The interviews suggested that course team members preferred to focus on their own modules and were often not particularly concerned with the course-level design. This causes a strain, not least because the overall student experience is derived from the course in its entirety, rather than individual modules.

Developing this point further, there was also evidence in the interviews of a 'silo mentality' amongst members of some course teams, whereby individual academic staff appeared to be defensive about their own subject and resistant to any attempt to structure a course in different ways. In some cases, this might be derived from individual academics' passion for their own discipline, whereas in others it may be a simple unwillingness to do anything that will involve additional work. Resistance to change can also be a manifestation of concern about the potential impact of change on student satisfaction metrics. Whatever the root cause, the task of managing this tension invariably falls on the course leader, who has to foster and maintain the coherence at course level whilst balancing the expectations of course team members at module level. The challenges faced by course leaders came up repeatedly in the interviews, and there was a general feeling amongst course leaders that they were not adequately supported in the role, nor were they allocated sufficient time to devote to their responsibilities.

The tendency on the part of academic staff to focus on aspects of a course in which they have expertise inevitably means that they will channel their efforts into their own modules, where they feel they have some direct control. The unfortunate consequence of this is that course design can become fragmented. If approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are not adequately considered at course level, then the result can be a disjointed course which seems more like a collection of individual modules rather than a coherent programme of study with a clear vision. Again, professional development should help to inculcate a better understanding of curriculum principles, but there should also be a focus on institutional procedures. It is important that such procedures support and facilitate course-level design.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the challenge of managing the competing demands on academic staff time. Within the activity system, this is in effect a tension between the subject (course team) and division of labour. Specifically, under division of labour it relates to the way in which power is exercised through the allocation of resources. It is evident from the literature that English universities have become increasingly managerialist in recent years and adopt performativity measures in an attempt to manage academic staff. Foremost amongst these measures is the use of workload allocation models through which academic staff are allocated notional packages of hours to devote to various activities, including teaching, research, course leadership and other responsibilities.

The overwhelming view to emerge from the interviews was that these workload allocation models do not adequately recognise the demands of course design activities, with course leaders bemoaning the lack of time available to manage the

course design process alongside other responsibilities. Similarly, there was a widespread perception that lack of time was one of the main reasons that course team members did not engage fully with the process. It was notable that the issue of time was also recognised as significant by academic managers, educational developers and quality assurance staff. Workload allocation models are generally based on 'tariffs' that set out the allocation of hours for different types of activity. It is reasonable to assume that such tariffs should be representative of the perceived time demands for each activity, and the relative priority attached to each activity. The interviews suggest that the tariffs are contentious, and it appears that allocations specifically for course design activities are rare.

In a similar vein, there was also a perception that research activity attracts more generous time allocations than activities related to learning and teaching. This may be a particular issue in research-intensive universities, but it serves to perpetuate the view that research activity is more highly valued and more likely to contribute to career progression. In this context, the unwillingness of some academic staff to engage with course design processes might be better understood. If they receive relatively generous hours allocations for research activity compared with negligible allocations for course design, it is unsurprising that they will prioritise research.

The obvious implication of this tension is that course leaders and course team members feel that they do not have sufficient time to devote to course design. It might be argued that this is merely a perception rather than a reality, but the view was so widespread that it does seem to have some credence. The obvious way of addressing this issue is for workload allocation models to recognise the demands of

course design and allocate hours accordingly. However, if one views workload allocation models as an expression of the strategic priorities of an institution, then this issue raises a more fundamental issue. If the models accurately reflect the extent to which institutions prioritise curriculum development relative to other activities, this must be a cause for concern. Society imposes expectations on universities to offer courses that meet the needs of the economy and to provide a challenging and rewarding academic experience for students. Universities must respond to these expectations by designing and delivering high-quality courses. Thus, curriculum development should be at the very heart of a university's operations. If curriculum development does not receive sufficient investment of resources, it is inevitable that the quality of courses will suffer.

As well as time, course teams and course leaders depend on various tools and artefacts that mediate their actions when they are engaged in course design, and the literature certainly identified how such tools and artefacts can take several forms. At a basic level, this will include quality assurance procedures that are fairly standard at most universities and are largely uncontentious. What is more variable is the extent of the resources and support for course design that institutions make available to course teams. Amongst these were the expertise of educational developers, typically located in central learning and teaching units, together with institutional curriculum frameworks, and an array of course design resources, including design guidance, models and toolkits.

The evidence from the interviews suggests that, at the very least, there is a somewhat precarious relationship between the subject (the course team) and these

tools and artefacts, and in some cases, there is a significant tension. Firstly, it is apparent that the extent of central support available for course design at most institutions is fairly modest, and it is generally optional for course teams to avail of this. The expertise was not always actively sought by course teams and was sometimes regarded with scepticism by academic staff. Secondly, it is evident that most institutions have adopted some form of curriculum framework in recent years. Whilst such frameworks undoubtedly serve as mediating tools or artefacts in the course design process, their influence is not always positive. This was especially true when curriculum frameworks were perceived by course teams as being centrally imposed in a 'top-down', standardised way. In such circumstances, course teams tended to respond in a fairly superficial way, and the frameworks were unlikely to make a significant contribution to creative course design. This issue could be interpreted as one of instrumental remediation (Engeström, 1999c, citing Engeström, 1996), in which new mediating tools and artefacts are introduced into the activity system to address a particular challenge, but no corresponding adjustments are made to other components of the activity system. Overlooking the importance of the activity system in its entirety therefore results in the new tools having limited impact.

What I found particularly striking in the interviews was the apparent lack of meaningful engagement with the principles on which curriculum design are based, including the theory, and the associated course design models and toolkits. This did not generally appear to be for ideological reasons, though there were one or two sceptical views about learning outcomes and constructive alignment. It seems more likely that the non-engagement could be related to a lack of awareness of the

principles, a failure to communicate the principles, an unwillingness to invest the time required to understand the principles, or perhaps a combination of these factors.

There is certainly no shortage of information available about curriculum design. The literature review demonstrated that there is an abundance of guidance available on the theory of curriculum, on the underlying principles of an outcomes-based approach to course design, and on the process of course design. Although there was an awareness of the principles amongst those interviewed, the general impression was that this was somewhat perfunctory. Despite the existence of design guidance and toolkits, there did not seem to be widespread adoption of these. The literature provides examples of how such guidance has informed the course design process at institutions around the world, and yet the evidence from the interviews indicates that such practice is not deeply embedded in most institutions. Even where comprehensive curriculum frameworks were introduced by universities, these seemed to focus on themes such as employability or research-based education, rather than providing a systematic basis for course design itself. The paradox here is that academics are, by their very nature, inquisitive and analytical, and they seek evidence to support claims and to justify actions. Despite this, many academics appear to be willing to adopt practices in their approach to course design that they would never accept in their own academic work.

The implication of this apparent lack of understanding of curriculum development principles and the reluctance to engage with sources of guidance is that course design will often be approached in a somewhat superficial manner. If that is the case

it is possible that opportunities will be missed to develop genuinely innovative courses and to create better learning experiences for students. I would suggest that there is a need here for developmental learning to improve understanding of curriculum development. This may require a combination of formal professional development activity, particularly for course teams, and consideration of how course teams access guidance and expertise. There appears to have been a tendency within institutions to address this issue through the introduction of some form of curriculum framework, but it is apparent that 'top down' approaches have limited impact, and it would be better to work directly with course teams to promote curriculum development in the context of a School or Department.

Summary of tensions and implications

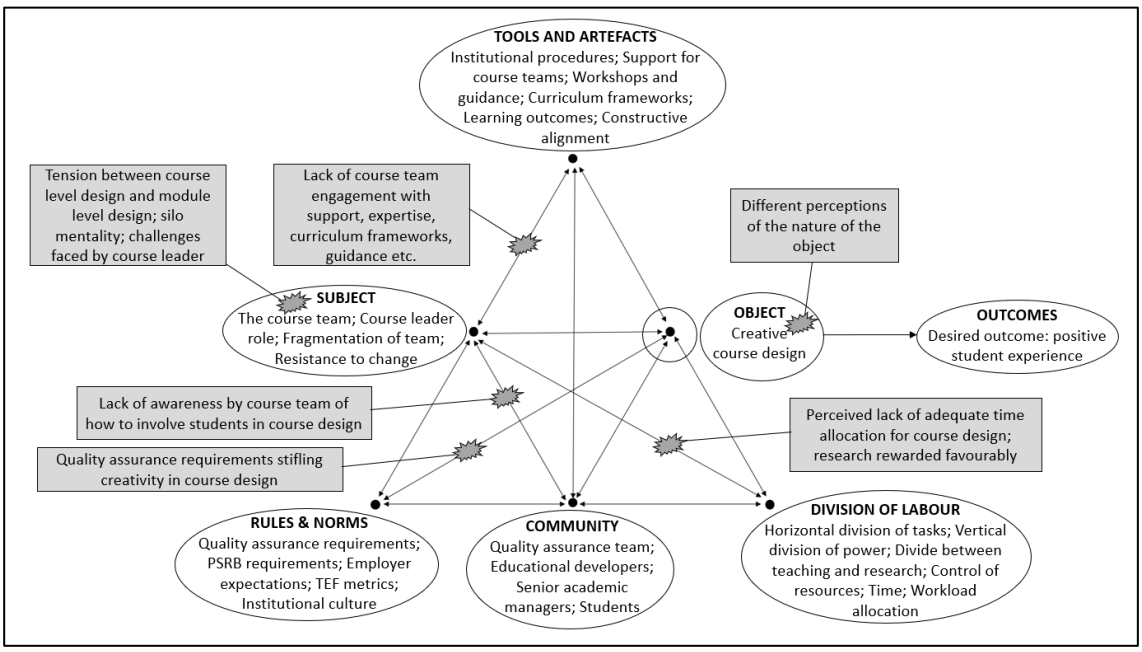

Figure 23: Activity system showing the themes and tensions to emerge from the study

To conclude this chapter, in the diagram above (Figure 23) I have summarised the key themes and tensions from the study. The oval shapes label each of the

components of the curriculum development activity system and identify the themes that emerged from the interviews in relation to each component. The grey boxes refer to tensions within the activity system, and the associated 'burst' shapes symbolise the location of those tensions, either within one of the components or between components. In the final chapter I will relate the findings to the research questions of the study.

Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study has examined the curriculum development process in English universities. The underlying premise on which the study has been based is that we can only understand the challenges of curriculum development by viewing it holistically. I have examined the factors that influence curriculum development and offered a theoretical framework that provides a means of analysing the process comprehensively. I have used this analysis to identify the inherent tensions in curriculum development, and then considered the implications of these tensions.

In this chapter I will draw together the key points to emerge from the study and present them by specific reference to the research questions. I will also reiterate the significance of the research whilst acknowledging its limitations. Finally, I will offer some suggestions for further research.

Addressing the research questions

What factors and sources influence, guide and shape the curriculum development process in English universities?

The literature review identified a diverse range of influences on curriculum development. High level factors exert influence by virtue of their official status and will apply in more or less the same way regardless of the university. English universities are subject to formal regulation so they will be required to operate within a framework that reflects government policy. In recent decades the higher education sector has been expected to adopt more business-like approaches and to produce graduates capable of contributing to the nation's economic growth.

Students are charged tuition fees and universities are expected to deliver value for money. A range of metrics are used to determine the performance of universities and hold them to account. Alongside the regulatory regime, any course that is professionally accredited is subject to an additional layer of influence from the accrediting professional bodies. Accreditation is highly prized, particularly in subjects where it is a prerequisite for professional practice, and the relevant professional body may exert significant influence on the curriculum.

Whilst these high-level influences apply to all universities, the way in which an institution responds to them may vary depending on the history and culture of a university. An increasingly managerialist approach seems to prevail in most institutions, whereby performativity measures are used in an attempt to improve scores against various national metrics. Universities have also introduced curriculum frameworks with the objective of achieving a consistent, institution-wide approach to the curriculum. However, these are generic in nature, and there is a risk that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach can be perceived by course teams as being imposed 'top-down'.

The leadership of, and support for learning and teaching within an institution is a significant factor, particularly the extent to which curriculum work is valued and recognised, and the dedicated resources that are allocated to it. This might include educational developers, who can work directly with course teams to support them in curriculum development, though only if course teams choose to avail themselves of the support. The extent to which students are involved in the process varies from

one institution to another, but the challenges of doing this in a meaningful way can result in somewhat tokenistic involvement.

Universities are required to have comprehensive quality assurance arrangements in place that set out procedures for the planning, approval and review of courses. Whilst academic staff generally acknowledge the need for such arrangements, they are invariably far more interested in their discipline than in bureaucratic procedures. The procedures are widely perceived as a constraint, and this can lead to a disproportionate focus on documentation and timelines rather than creativity.

Overall, what is evident is that the factors that influence curriculum development are varied and disparate, and involve a wide range of different parties, each with their own priorities, values and histories. The process becomes even more complicated as these factors feed into the process of course design, which is further shaped by diverse sources of guidance. The guidance informs the design at course-level, module-level and at the level of learning activities, and will typically be underpinned by an outcomes-based approach and the principle of constructive alignment. However, in many cases the guidance itself is not very precise, and this exacerbates the complexity of the process.

Curriculum development clearly takes place within a highly complex environment and it can be problematic to appreciate the process in its entirety. There appears to be a tendency to focus on aspects of the process in isolation, without necessarily taking into account the broader context. A deeper understanding requires a more holistic analysis of the process.

To what extent can activity systems analysis provide a means of considering curriculum development holistically?

Activity theory has provided a powerful lens through which to view curriculum development, and the activity systems analysis of the process has proved to be a valuable tool in taking a holistic perspective. I highlighted in the previous section how complex curriculum development is in terms of both the diverse influences and the multiple participants. Activity systems analysis is particularly well-suited to examining complex phenomena within a wider social context, and in this instance, it has certainly enabled me to adopt a systematic approach to the analysis of a disparate range of data.

The unit of analysis is the activity system as a whole, and this has provided a manageable framework within which all the diverse influences could be considered without losing sight of the importance of the overall process. Thus, having identified the key themes emerging from the interview data, they could be classified in terms of the elements of an activity system: subject; object; tools; community; rules and norms; and division of labour. Inevitably, this demanded some careful thought in deciding on the appropriate classification, and I was not always certain that I had made the right decision. For example, in considering the issue of quality assurance, should this be classified as a 'rules and norms' issue because the requirements constitute rules relating to the process, or a 'tools and artefacts' issue because the procedures support the process, or even a 'community' issue because of the involvement of quality assurance staff? Similarly, with the issue of behavioural norms within course teams, a classification under 'rules and norms' may seem the obvious choice, but it could also be a 'subject' issue because it refers to behaviour within the

course team. Ultimately, I realised that, provided there was a logic to the choice of classification, this did not necessarily undermine the value of the analysis. The important point is that the activity system allowed me to bring the issues to the surface, see the connections between the different elements of the system and identify the inherent tensions, all whilst retaining an overview of the system as a whole.

What inherent tensions are revealed by analysing the curriculum development process as an activity system?

The activity systems analysis has revealed six systemic tensions that appear to be inherent in the curriculum development process. As I have indicated previously, we should avoid viewing these tensions in isolation, because they are all linked to one another. Nevertheless, in order to summarise them it is necessary to present them in turn.

Firstly, whilst on the surface there may be broad agreement amongst all stakeholders that creative course design is the object of the process, the evidence points to differences as to what this actually means in practice. Whilst academic staff may be motivated by a desire to instil their own passion for the subject in their students, managers may be more concerned with creating a course that attracts large numbers of students and thereby boosts income.

Students' views on the object of curriculum development may relate to the educational experience, and many students will have valuable insights that could contribute to the process. Unfortunately, universities do not seem to be able to

articulate precisely how they want students to contribute in a meaningful way, and their involvement often seems to be rather tokenistic.

A third tension exists between the subject (the course team) and the tools and artefacts in the form of the support and guidance for curriculum development. This manifests itself in the limited engagement that some course teams appear to have with curriculum support. As the literature review revealed, curriculum development is a highly complex process and is subject to many influences. Academic staff facing competing demands on their time may be reluctant to engage with sources of support and guidance.

The fourth tension highlighted by the analysis was between course-level design and module-level design. This could stem from a lack of clarity in many sources of guidance about the distinction between course-level and module-level design. Coherence depends on an effective course-level approach, but the process can become fragmented, resembling a collection of individual module designs rather than a coherent programme of study. This tension is exacerbated when individual team members' enthusiasm for their own disciplinary specialism outweighs their concern for broader, course-related themes.

The guidance that supports course design typically promotes an approach based on constructive alignment in which learning outcomes, assessment tasks and learning activities are all aligned. Following such an approach provides course teams with a framework to contextualise a field of study and creatively produce a positive learning experience for students. If academic staff are not committed to these curriculum

principles, managing the course design will inevitably be difficult. Quality assurance requirements exist in universities to counteract this challenge by establishing procedures and documentation to maintain minimum standards. However, there is an inherent tension between these quality assurance requirements and the desire to promote a creative approach to course design. When there are so many competing demands on time and the commitment to a genuinely creative approach is limited, the process may default to a bureaucratic one.

The final tension relates to the time that is awarded under workload allocation models to devote to course design. This can be viewed as a tension between the subject and division of labour. Course team members with responsibilities in teaching, research and administration are 'managed' via a system in which power is exercised by allocating notional blocks of time to different activities. If staff perceive an imbalance between the time allocations for different activities, then it is inevitable that they will be drawn to those areas where they feel that their efforts are adequately acknowledged. Thus, if research activity attracts an allocation significantly more substantial than curriculum activities, it is not surprising that staff will be inclined to spend more time on research.

What are the implications of such an analysis for the management of curriculum development in English universities?

The identification of tensions in the curriculum development activity system is of little value unless they are seen as sources for positive change through developmental learning. Each of the tensions identified might be considered to have significant implications individually, and these in turn could point to some individual

opportunities for developmental learning. However, what is striking is that, when viewed in overall terms, there is a common thread running through the tensions and implications. Fundamentally, there appear to be a tendency to focus separately on the individual components and parties involved. This leads to a lack of appreciation of the multiple perspectives and a lack of understanding of the underlying principles of curriculum development.

Academic staff in course teams should recognise the value that other parties bring to the curriculum development process. This includes the input of managers who have to reconcile the aspirations of course teams with the broader strategic and financial aims of the university. It also includes the contributions of quality assurance staff who have a role in maintaining and enhancing standards, and educational developers who have expertise in learning and teaching. The potential value of the student perspective should not be overlooked, but it is really important that there is some agreement on what the contribution of students should be, and how their insight will inform the process.

Equally, academic staff in course teams must be acknowledged as the key participants in the curriculum development process. They bring their disciplinary expertise and their experience of working directly with students. They need to be given the freedom to innovate in course design and to produce courses that provide positive learning experiences for students, whilst also meeting disciplinary and regulatory requirements. However, with this freedom comes responsibilities. Course teams must ensure that they have a deep understanding of curriculum principles and are able to apply those principles meaningfully to course design. This requires a

commitment to coherent course design and the avoidance of fragmentation and excessive focus at module level.

Course teams will need to be supported in this role, and there must be constructive dialogue between the various parties involved in a mutually supportive spirit. It is also important that the time allocations awarded for curriculum work are an accurate reflection of the time and effort required to undertake the complex course design process.

The opportunities for developmental learning are significant. Clearly, professional development has a role to play here, but caution is required because simply providing formal training for staff is unlikely to bring about real change on its own. The change that is necessary requires an institutional commitment to adopting a holistic approach to curriculum development. Rather than tackling the perceived problems by introducing new procedures or new curriculum frameworks, a broader review of the process in its entirety is required. It is essential that the contributions of all the parties involved in the process, including academic staff, professional staff and students, are acknowledged and valued, and that the parties are brought together for open and constructive discussions about their respective roles. Finally, it is imperative that curriculum development is afforded the priority status it warrants within universities and recognised as a key strategic activity.

The implications of each of the tensions identified are summarised in Table 5 below, together with an indication of the possible developmental learning that could address the tension.

Tension	Implications	Possible developmental learning
Different perceptions of the nature of the object	Lack of acknowledgement of respective roles by managers and academic staff. Could lead to feelings of resentment	Open discussion about the object. Recognition of different perspectives. Develop shared understanding.
Lack of awareness of how to involve students in curriculum development process	Missed opportunity to benefit from student insights and perceptions.	Identify the objective of student involvement. Promote deeper understanding of student partnerships.
Lack of course team understanding of curriculum design principles and lack of engagement with support and guidance	Superficial approach to curriculum development. Missed opportunity to develop innovative courses.	Formal professional development. Review how course teams access support. Consider support at course team level.
Tension between course level and module level design	Fragmentation of the course. Lack of coherence of the overall course.	Professional development and consideration of institutional procedures.
Tension between quality assurance requirements and creative course design	Disproportionate focus on bureaucratic requirements. Lack of focus on creativity. Uneasy relationship between QA staff and academics.	Professional development. Review of institutional procedures.
Inadequate time allocation for course design activities	Course teams do not have enough time to devote to course design.	Review workload allocation models. Review where curriculum development sits within institutional priorities.

Table 5: Summary of tensions, implications and developmental learning

Significance of the research

One could argue with some justification that all the key points to emerge from this study were already known as relevant issues in the field of curriculum development. The existing literature relating to both curriculum development and detailed course design might lead one to believe that every facet of the process has already been sufficiently addressed in earlier research, so here I will set out how this study offers a different perspective.

In Chapter 1 I argued that the existing literature on curriculum development in higher education appears to be somewhat fragmented, and I demonstrated through an extensive literature review in Chapter 2 just how diverse the literature in this field is. The widely-debated conceptualisations of the higher education curriculum, as

exemplified by studies such as those by Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) or Annala et.al. (2016), rightly receive extensive coverage in the literature. This aspect is important because curriculum development and course design will naturally be influenced by the way in which the individuals involved understand the curriculum. Similarly, the diverse influences on the curriculum, including the regulatory, political, social and institutional influences, are necessarily subject to widespread coverage. The mechanics of the course design process must additionally be considered, though as I noted previously, some of the coverage is somewhat superficial or even potentially misleading. Furthermore, simply looking at the process in isolation as a step-by-step procedure to be followed fails to acknowledge the broader issues that should be taken into account.

My analysis has identified the challenges arising from various tensions in the curriculum development process, and it is evident that there has long been an awareness of the existence of such challenges. The contested nature of the purpose of curriculum development has been a recurring theme in higher education research, with many academics bemoaning the loss of traditional higher education values in favour of a more managerialist and marketized environment (Lynch, 2015; Deem and Baird, 2019). Similarly, the challenges of engaging students in the curriculum development process in a meaningful way have been addressed in numerous studies and formal guidance (e.g. Bovill et.al., 2009; Healey et.al., 2014). There is a very large body of literature offering guidance on course design (e.g. Moon, 2002; O'Neill, 2015) or examining the principles of design (e.g. Wiggins and McTighe, 2005; Biggs and Tang, 2011). The tension between quality assurance requirements and creative

course design is specifically referred to by Ferrell (2011), Brady and Bates (2016) and Cooper (2017). Finally, the challenges associated with workload models and the allocation of adequate time for curriculum-related activities is addressed by Graham (2016) and Kenny (2017). Thus, I cannot claim to be revealing these tensions for the first time, but in the existing literature there has been a tendency to consider the issues individually. However, in my work I have adopted a wider perspective and located curriculum development within its social context. The activity systems analysis has enabled the interplay between the various tensions to be taken into account.

As I noted in Chapter 3, I am not the first researcher to apply activity theory to the study of the curriculum. Cliff et al. (2020) used activity theory to look at the unbundling of the higher education curriculum. Garraway (2011) investigated the relationship between university and work in the curriculum through the lens of an activity system, whilst Alexander and Hjortsø (2019) applied activity systems analysis to the process of participatory curriculum development. Whilst each of these examples uses activity theory to aid the understanding of the curriculum within its context, they have each addressed very different research problems. With the possible exception of the study by Alexander and Hjortsø (2019), the examples do not specifically set out to identify inherent tensions in the curriculum development process. Even that study is primarily concerned with contradictions arising from participation in curriculum development by a wider range of stakeholders than has traditionally been the case. It should also be noted that none of the examples cited

have been specifically concerned with curriculum development within the English higher education system.

I have argued throughout that in order to fully understand the process we need to consider it holistically. Activity theory has enabled me to do exactly that. By taking a wider perspective, the activity systems analysis has revealed how the elements of the system interact and how tensions within and between elements create challenges. This in turn has helped in identifying implications and suggesting developmental learning to address the challenges. It is this holistic approach to the study of curriculum development, with the insight that an activity systems analysis offers, that distinguishes this work from related studies in the field.

Limitations of the research

Alongside the claims above about the significance of my research, I must also acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the primary data for the analysis is derived from interviews at a relatively small number of English universities. Whilst there was some stratification in terms of both the type of institution and the geographical location, it cannot be deemed a representative sample. Of course, I was not seeking generalisability in my sampling, but I have to acknowledge that a sample size of twelve universities out of a total of over 100 raises the possibility that a larger sample or a different sample may yield different results.

My research involved a two-stage approach. The aim of the first stage was breadth and the interviews involved a single participant at eleven universities. The second stage sought to achieve greater depth with a much wider range of participants at a

single university. I have to acknowledge the possibility that the particular circumstances of that one university may have skewed the data somewhat, though in my defence I must point out that similar issues did come up in the interviews at the other eleven institutions.

My own professional experience in the field of curriculum development could be construed as a limitation, because of the likelihood of preconceptions. In a similar vein, I have to acknowledge the potential impact of my status as an insider researcher, particularly in the second stage interviews where a professional relationship existed with the interviewees. As I noted in the research methodology chapter, I adopted a reflexive approach, constantly challenging my own interpretations. Furthermore, I felt that the sense of empathy and trust that existed between myself and the interviewees outweighed any threats to the validity of the data.

Opportunities for further research

I set out with a reasonably clear set of research goals for this study and, notwithstanding the limitations I outlined in the previous section, I feel that I have achieved these goals. Inevitably, the process of immersing oneself in such a detailed study means that other ideas for research are likely to emerge. Apart from the obvious opportunities to conduct similar studies that are larger in scale or wider in scope, there is one aspect of my study that I believe warrants a more thorough investigation.

In the literature review I was struck by the confusing nature of much of the guidance that exists to support course design. It was also evident from the interviews that some of the key participants in the course design process, including course leaders, had a somewhat limited understanding of curriculum principles. I think it would be worthwhile to investigate this issue in greater detail to establish whether these two factors are linked, or whether the confusion is derived from other causes.

Closing comments

This study has provided a distinctive perspective on the curriculum development process in English universities. An activity systems analysis has highlighted a number of inherent structural tensions in the process. To address the challenges, it is proposed that a holistic approach is necessary, rather than dealing individually with the elements of the system. It is also proposed that curriculum development needs to be recognised as a key strategic activity.

In the Introduction chapter I highlighted the view that curriculum development is, in effect, higher education's equivalent of product development. One of the interviewees in the study also made this point. Having completed this study, a slightly different analogy comes to mind, perhaps as a result of my original career as a building surveyor. The design and construction of buildings involves many different parties including clients, architects, engineers, quantity surveyors, regulatory authorities and contractors. A successful building demands the effective integration of all these roles, and deficiencies in any aspect of the process will result in problems. It may be that the space does not work well, or there are defects in the construction, or the building is costing too much to run. Whilst remedial measures can be

introduced retrospectively, it is far better to get the design right in the first place, and to ensure that the design and construction process has been properly managed. I believe that the same principle applies to curriculum development. We must do everything we can to promote effective curriculum design and to ensure that the management of the process successfully integrates the contributions of all parties involved.

REFERENCES

Adler, P.S., Seok-Woo Kwon, and Charles Heckscher. (2008). Professional Work: The Emergence of Collaborative Community. *Organization Science*, 19 (2), 359–376.

Advance HE. (2018). Graduate Attributes Framework (online). *Advance HE*. Available from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/graduate-attributes-framework [Accessed 18 January 2020].

Alexander, I.K. and Hjortsø, C.N. (2019). Sources of complexity in participatory curriculum development: an activity system and stakeholder analysis approach to the analyses of tensions and contradictions. *Higher Education*, 77 (2), 301–322.

Anakin, M. et al. (2017). The contextual nature of university-wide curriculum change. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23 (3), 206–218.

Anderson, T.R. and Rogan, J.M. (2011). Bridging the educational research-teaching practice gap: Curriculum development, Part 1: Components of the curriculum and influences on the process of curriculum design. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 39 (1), 68–76.

Anfara, V.A. and Mertz, N.T. (2014). Setting the Scene. In: Anfara, V.A. and Mertz, N.T. (eds.). *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Anglia Ruskin University. (2018). *Active Curriculum Framework*. [Online]: Anglia Ruskin University. Available from https://aru.ac.uk/-/media/Files/Anglia-learning-and-teaching/Strategy/Active-Curriculum-Framework.pdf [Accessed 19 January 2020].

Annala, J., Linden, J. and Makinen, M. (2016). Curriculum in higher education research. In: Case, J.M. and Huisman, J. (eds.). *Researching higher education: International perspectives on theory, policy and practice*. London and Oxford: Society for Research into Higher Education and Routledge.

Archibald, M.M. et al. (2019). Using Zoom Videoconferencing for Qualitative Data Collection: Perceptions and Experiences of Researchers and Participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18.

Athena Forum. (2018). *Work Allocation Models*. [Online]: Athena Forum. Available from https://athenaforum.org.uk/media/1144/athena-forum-wam-reportjanuary2018.pdf [Accessed 9 August 2018].

Bajada, C., Kandlbinder, P. and Trayler, R. (2019). A general framework for cultivating innovations in higher education curriculum. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38 (3), 1–14.

Barnett, R. (1990). *The idea of higher education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Barnett, R. and Coate, K. (2005). *Engaging the curriculum*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Becher, T. (1989). *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Beck, J. and Young, M.F.D. (2005). The assault on the professions and the restructuring of academic and professional identities: a Bernsteinian analysis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26 (2), 183–197.

Beetham, H. (2009). *Synthesis report: Baselining the institutional processes of curriculum design*. Bristol: JISC.

Begoray, D.L. and Banister, E.M. (2010). Reflexivity. In: Mills, A.J. Durepos, G. and Wiebe, E. (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc., 789–790.

BERA. (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 4th ed. London: British Educational Research Association.

Bernard, H.R., Wutich, A. and Ryan, G.W. (2017). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Biggs, J. (1996). Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. *Higher education*, 32 (3), 347–364.

Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Binns, C. (2015). What can 'social practice' theory and 'socio-cultural' theory contribute to our understanding of the processes of module design? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39 (5), 758–775.

Bitzer, E. and Wilkinson, A. (2009). Higher education as a field of study and research. In: Bitzer, E. (ed.). *Higher education in South Africa: A scholarly look behind the scenes*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 369–408.

Blackler, F. (2009). Cultural-historical activity theory and organization studies. In: Sannino, A. Daniels, H. and Gutiérrez, K.D. (eds.). *Learning and expanding with activity theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 19–39.

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2010). *How To Research*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Bligh, B. and Flood, M. (2015). The Change Laboratory in Higher Education: research-intervention using activity theory. In: Huisman, J. and Tight, M. (eds.). *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research III*. Bingley: Emerald, 141–168.

Bligh, B. and Flood, M. (2017). Activity theory in empirical higher education research: choices, uses and values. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 23 (2), 125–152.

Bovill, C., Morss, K. and Bulley, C. (2009). Should students participate in curriculum design? Discussion arising from a first year curriculum design project and a literature review. *Pedagogical Research in Maximising Education*, 3 (2), 17–26.

Bovill, C. et al. (2016). Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: Overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships. *Higher Education*, 71 (2), 195–208.

Boyd, C. (2018). A beginner's guide to the Office for Students [Online]. *Wonkhe*. Available from https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-beginners-guide-to-the-office-for-students/ [Accessed 29 September 2019].

Brady, N. and Bates, A. (2016). The standards paradox: How quality assurance regimes can subvert teaching and learning in higher education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 15 (2), 155–174.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3 (2), 77–101.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: SAGE Publications.

Braxton, J.M. (2010). Norms and the work of colleges and universities: Introduction to the special issue—Norms in academia. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81 (3), 243–250.

Brennan, J. and Teichler, U. (2008). The future of higher education and of higher education research. *Higher education*, 56 (3), 259–264.

Brooman, S., Darwent, S. and Pimor, A. (2015). The student voice in higher education curriculum design: is there value in listening? *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52 (6), 663–674.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burrage, M. (1994). Routine and discreet relationships: professional accreditation and the State in Britain. In: Becher, T. (ed.). *Governments and Professional Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Chowdhury, M.F. (2015). Coding, sorting and sifting of qualitative data analysis: Debates and discussion. *Quality & Quantity*, 49 (3), 1135–1143.

Clegg, S. and Smith, K. (2010). Learning, teaching and assessment strategies in higher education: contradictions of genre and desiring. *Research Papers in Education*, 25 (1), 115–132.

Cliff, A. et al. (2020). Unbundling and higher education curriculum: a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory view of process. *Teaching in Higher Education*

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Collini, S. (2016). Who are the spongers now? [Online]. *London Review of Books*. Available from https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n02/stefan-collini/who-are-the-spongers-now [Accessed 14 October 2019].

Conole, G. (2013). *Designing for Learning in an Open World*. New York, NY: Springer.

Cooper, T. (2017). Curriculum Renewal: Barriers to Successful Curriculum Change and Suggestions for Improvement. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 5 (11), 115–128.

Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

Cortés-Sánchez, J.D. (2017). What do universities want to be? A content analysis of mission and vision statements worldwide [Online]. *LSE Impact Blog*. Available from https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/12/20/what-do-universities-want-to-be-a-content-analysis-of-mission-and-vision-statements-worldwide/ [Accessed 30 September 2019].

Creswell, J.W. (2015). *30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

de Paor, C. (2016). The contribution of professional accreditation to quality assurance in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, 22 (3), 228–241.

DeCarlo, M. (2018). *Scientific inquiry in social work [Online]*. Pressbooks. Available from https://scientificinquiryinsocialwork.pressbooks.com/ [Accessed 25 July 2020].

Deem, R. (1998). 'New managerialism' and higher education: The management of performances and cultures in universities in the United Kingdom. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8 (1), 47–70.

Deem, R. and Baird, J. (2019). The English Teaching Excellence (and Student Outcomes) Framework: Intelligent accountability in higher education? *Journal of Educational Change*, 21, 215–243.

Devers, K.J. and Frankel, R.M. (2000). Study design in qualitative research-2: Sampling and data collection strategies. *Education for Health; Abingdon*, 13 (2), 263.

Dillon, J.T. (2009). The questions of curriculum. *Journal of curriculum studies*, 41 (3), 343–359.

Ellis, R. (2018). Quality Assurance for University Teaching: Issues and Approaches. In: Ellis, R. and Hogard, E. (eds.). *Handbook of quality assurance for University teaching*. London: Routledge.

Engeström, Y. (1999a). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In: Engeström, Y. Miettinen, R. and Punamaki, R.-L. (eds.). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (1999b). Expansive visibilization of work: An activity-theoretical perspective. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 8 (1–2), 63–93.

Engestrom, Y. (1999). Innovative learning in work teams: Analyzing cycles of knowledge creation in practice. In: Engeström, Y. Miettinen, R. and Punamaki, R.-L. (eds.). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of education and work*, 14 (1), 133–156.

Engeström, Y. (2008). *From teams to knots: Activity-theoretical studies of collaboration and learning at work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2010). Activity theory and learning at work. In: Malloch, M. Cairns, L. Evans, K. et al. (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Workplace Learning*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

Engeström, Y. (2014). *Learning by expanding*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eraut, M. (1994). *Developing professional knowledge and competence*. London: The Falmer Press.

Eraut, M. (2009). Transfer of knowledge between education and workplace settings. In: Daniels, H. Lauder, H. and Porter, J. (eds.). *Knowledge, Values and Educational Policy: A Critical Perspective*. London: Routledge.

Erikson, M.G. and Erikson, M. (2019). Learning outcomes and critical thinking – good intentions in conflict. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44 (12), 2293–2303.

Eurydice. (2019). Types of Higher Education Institutions [Online]. *Eurydice - European Commission*. Available from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-91_en [Accessed 24 November 2019].

Fanghanel, J. (2011). *Being an Academic*. Florence, UNITED STATES: Taylor & Francis Group.

Ferrell, G. (2011). *Transforming curriculum design: transforming institutions [Online]*. Bristol: JISC. Available from https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20140614155436/http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/briefingpapers/2011/bpcurriculumdesign.aspx#downloads [Accessed 1 September 2019].

Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research*, 5th Edition. London: Sage Publications Limited.

Floyd, A. and Arthur, L. (2010). Researching from Within: Moral and Ethical Issues and Dilemmas [Online]. *Proceedings of SRHE Annual Conference 2010*. 14 December 2010. Celtic Manor, Newport: Society for Research into Higher Education. Available from http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2010/abstracts/0108.pdf [Accessed 18 January 2020].

Foot, K. and Groleau, C. (2011). Contradictions, transitions, and materiality in organizing processes: An activity theory perspective. *First Monday*, 16 (6).

Foot, K.A. (2014). Cultural-historical activity theory: Exploring a theory to inform practice and research. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 24 (3), 329–347.

Fotheringham, J., Strickland, K. and Aitchison, K. (2012). *Curriculum: Directions, Decisions and Debate [Online]*. Quality Assurance Agency Scotland. Available from https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/developing-

and-supporting-the-curriculum/curriculum-directions-decisions-and-debate.pdf?sfvrsn=b445f681_10 [Accessed 19 January 2020].

Fraser, S.P. and Bosanquet, A.M. (2006). The curriculum? That's just a unit outline, isn't it? *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (03), 269–284.

Fung, D. (2017). *A connected curriculum for higher education*. London: UCL Press.

Garraway, J. (2011). University and work: Curriculum enquiry from an activity theory perspective. In: Bitzer, E. and Botha, N. (eds.). *Curriculum Inquiry in South African Higher Education: Some scholarly affirmations and challenges*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

Gibbs, G. (2013). Reflections on the changing nature of educational development. *International journal for academic development*, 18 (1), 4–14.

Goodlad, J.I. (2001). Curriculum as a Field of Educational Study. In: Smelser, N.J. and Baltes, P.B. (eds.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Oxford: Pergamon, 3187–3191. Available from https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/02416-5 [Accessed 23 February 2021].

Gosling, D. (2009). Educational development in the UK: a complex and contradictory reality. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 14 (1), 5–18.

Gosling, D. and Moon, J. (2002). *How to Use Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria*. London: The SEEC Office.

Gourlay, L. (2017). Student engagement, 'learnification'and the sociomaterial: critical perspectives on higher education policy. *Higher Education Policy*, 30 (1).

Graham, A.T. (2016). Role of academic managers in workload and performance management of academic staff: A case study. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44 (6), 1042–1063.

Guest, G., Namey, E.E. and Mitchell, M.L. (2013). *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

Hall, R. and Smyth, K. (2016). Dismantling the curriculum in higher education. *Open Library of Humanities*, 2 (1).

Hammersley, M. (2012). Troubling theory in case study research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31 (3), 393–405.

Hardman, J. (2005). Activity theory as a potential framework for technology research in an unequal terrain. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19 (2), 378–392.

Harman, K.M. (1989). Professional versus Academic Values: Cultural Ambivalence in University Professional School in Australia. *Higher Education*, 18 (5), 491–509.

Hasan, H. and Kazlauskas, A. (2014). Activity Theory: who is doing what, why and how. In: Hasan, H. (ed.). *Being Practical with Theory: A Window into Business Research*. Morrisville: Lulu Press, 9–14.

Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*. New York: SUNY Press.

Havnes, A. (2004). Examination and learning: an activity-theoretical analysis of the relationship between assessment and educational practice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29 (2), 159–176.

HEA. (2011). *The UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education*. York: The Higher Education Aacdemy.

Healey, M., O'Connor, K.M. and Broadfoot, P. (2010). Reflections on engaging students in the process and product of strategy development for learning, teaching, and assessment: an institutional case study. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 15 (1), 19–32.

Healey, M. et al. (2013). Collaborative discipline-based curriculum change: applying Change Academy processes at department level. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18 (1), 31–44.

Healey, M., Flint, A. and Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Hellawell, D. (2006). Inside–out: analysis of the insider–outsider concept as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in students doing qualitative research. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11 (4), 483–494.

Hicks, O. (2018). Curriculum in Higher Education: Confusion, complexity and currency. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 5.

Hill, J., Walkington, H. and France, D. (2016). Graduate attributes: Implications for higher education practice and policy. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 40 (2), 155–163.

Hockings, C. (2010). *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: a synthesis of research*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Hubball, H. and Burt, H. (2004). An integrated approach to developing and implementing learning-centred curricula. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 9 (1).

Hussey, T. and Smith, P. (2008). Learning outcomes: a conceptual analysis. *Teaching in higher education*, 13 (1), 107–115.

Jenkins, A. (2009). Supporting Student Development In and Beyond the Disciplines. In: Kreber, C. (ed.). *The University and its disciplines: Teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary boundaries*. Abingdon: Routledge, 157–168.

JISC/HESA. (2011). *What is a Course? [Online]*. JISC and Higher Education Statistics Agency. Available from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/What-is-a-course_2011.pdf [Accessed 12 January 2020].

Jonassen, D.H. and Rohrer-Murphy, L. (1999). Activity theory as a framework for designing constructivist learning environments. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 47 (1), 61–79.

Kahu, E.R. and Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37 (1), 58–71.

Kandiko, C.B. and Mawer, M. (2013). *Student expectations and perceptions of higher education*. London: King's Learning Institute.

Kaptelinin, V. (2005). The object of activity: Making sense of the sense-maker. *Mind, culture, and Activity*, 12 (1), 4–18.

Kenny, J. (2017). Academic work and performativity. *Higher education.*, 74 (5), 897–913.

Kenny, J. (2018). Re-empowering academics in a corporate culture: an exploration of workload and performativity in a university. *Higher Education*, 75 (2), 365–380.

Klemenčič, M. and Chirikov, I. (2015). How Do We Know How Students Experience Higher Education? On the Use of Student Surveys. In: Curaj, A. Matei, L. Pricopie, R. et al. (eds.). *The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies*. New York: Springer International Publishing, 361–379.

Knight, P.T. (2001). Complexity and Curriculum: A process approach to curriculum-making. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6 (3), 369–381.

Knight, P.T. and Trowler, P.R. (2000). Department-level Cultures and the Improvement of Learning and Teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25 (1), 69–83.

Kuutti, K. (1996). Activity theory as a potential framework for human-computer interaction research. In: Nardi, B.A. (ed.). *Context and consciousness: Activity*

theory and human-computer interaction. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Lautenbach, G. (2010). Expansive learning cycles: Lecturers using educational technologies for teaching and learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 24 (5), 699–715.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, Y.-J. (2011). More than just story-telling: cultural–historical activity theory as an under-utilized methodology for educational change research. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43 (3), 403–424.

Liaw, S.S., Hatala, M. and Huang, H.M. (2010). Investigating acceptance toward mobile learning to assist individual knowledge management: Based on activity theory approach. *Computers & Education*, 54 (2), 446–454.

Lichtman, M. (2009). *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide*, Second Edition. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Longcroft, A. and Cross, I. (2020). The Role of Curriculum Frameworks in Higher Education [Online]. *#LTHEchat*. Available from https://lthechat.com/2020/01/12/lthechat-163-the-role-of-curriculum-frameworks-in-higher-education-with-adam-longcroft-adaml50-and-iain-cross-iain-d-cross/ [Accessed 18 January 2020].

Lynch, K. (2015). Control by numbers: New managerialism and ranking in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 56 (2), 190–207.

Marken, J.A. (2006). An Application of Activity Theory. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 19 (2), 27–49.

Marshall, S.J. et al. (2011). Leading and managing learning and teaching in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30 (2).

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edition. London: SAGE.

Maxwell, J. (2009). Designing a Qualitative Study. In: Bickman, L. and Rog, D. (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

May, H. and Bridger, K. (2010). *Developing and embedding inclusive policy and practice in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33 (1), 1–17.

Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Milburn, P.C. (2010). The role of programme directors as academic leaders. *Active learning in higher education*, 11 (2), 87–95.

Moon, J. (2002). *The Module and Programme Development Handbook: A Practical Guide to Linking Levels, Outcomes and Assessment Criteria*. London: Routledge.

Morgan, H. and Houghton, A.-M. (2011). *Inclusive curriculum design in higher education: Considerations for effective practice across and within subject areas*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Moser, A. and Korstjens, I. (2018). Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24 (1), 9–18.

Muller, J. (2009). Forms of knowledge and curriculum coherence. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22 (3), 205–226.

Murphy, E. and Rodríguez-Manzanares, M.A. (2008). Contradictions between the virtual and physical high school classroom: A third-generation Activity Theory perspective. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39 (6), 1061–1072.

Murphy, E. and Rodriguez-Manzanares, M.A. (2009). Using Activity Theory and its Principle of Contradictions to Guide Research in Educational Technology. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 24 (4), 442–457.

Murphy, E. and Rodriguez-Manzanares, M.A. (2014). *Activity Theory Perspectives on Technology in Higher Education*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Murphy, M. and Curtis, W. (2013). The micro-politics of micro-leadership: exploring the role of programme leader in English universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35 (1), 34–44.

Mwanza, D. (2002). Towards an activity-oriented design method for HCI research and practice. [PhD Thesis]. Open University.

Mwanza, D. and Engeström, Y. (2003). Pedagogical adeptness in the design of e-learning environments: experiences from the Lab@ Future Project. *E-Learn: World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education*. 2003. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 1344–1347.

Narayan, A. (2011). U.S. Higher Education Glossary [Online]. *US News & World Report*. Available from https://www.usnews.com/education/best-

colleges/articles/2011/08/15/us-higher-education-glossary [Accessed 12 January 2020].

Nardi, B.A. (1996). *Context and consciousness: Activity theory and human-computer interaction*. MIT Press.

Neary, M. (2003). Curriculum concepts and research; In. *Curriculum studies in postcompulsory and adult education: A teacher's and student teacher's study guide*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 33–56.

OfS. (2018a). The regulatory framework for higher education in England [Online]. *Office for Students*. Available from https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/the-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/ [Accessed 29 September 2019].

OfS. (2018b). What is the TEF? [Online]. *Office for Students*. Available from https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/what-is-the-tef/ [Accessed 28 September 2019].

O'Leary, M., Cui, V. and French, A. (2019). *Understanding, recognising and rewarding teaching quality in higher education: an exploration of the impact and implications of the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework*. Universities and Colleges Union.

O'Neill, G. (2010). Initiating curriculum revision: exploring the practices of educational developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 15 (1), 61–71.

O'Neill, G. (2015). *Curriculum Design in Higher Education: Theory to Practice*. Dublin: UCD Teaching & Learning.

O'Neill, G., Donnelly, R. and Fitzmaurice, M. (2013). Supporting programme teams to develop sequencing in higher education curricula. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19 (4), 268–280.

Ornstein, A.C. and Hunkins, F.P. (2016). *Curriculum: Foundations, principles, and issues*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE.

Payne, G. and Payne, J. (2004). *Key Concepts in Social Research*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Pinar, W.F. (2004). *What Is Curriculum Theory?* Routledge.

Polk, D. (2017). Symbolic Interactionism. In: Allen, M. (ed.). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Porter, W.W. et al. (2014). Blended learning in higher education: Institutional adoption and implementation. *Computers & Education*, 75, 185–195.

QAA. (2014). UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards - The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies. Available from http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/qualifications-frameworks.pdf [Accessed 20 April 2017].

QAA. (2018a). *The revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education & UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment. Available from https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code [Accessed 22 October 2020].

QAA. (2018b). *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and Guidance - Course Design and Development*. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Available from https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/course-design-and-development [Accessed 22 October 2020].

QAA. (2020). Subject Benchmark Statements - Full List [Online]. *Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*. Available from https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements [Accessed 22 October 2020].

Rapley, T. (2016). Some pragmatics of data analysis. In: Silverman, D. (ed.). *Qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Richards, L. (2005). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide*. London: SAGE Publications.

Richards, L. and Morse, J.M. (2012). *README FIRST for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

Richardson, J.T. (2013). The National Student Survey and its impact on UK higher education. In: Shah, M. and Sid Nair, C. (eds.). *Enhancing Student Feedback and Improvement Systems in Tertiary Education*. CAA Quality Series. Vol.5. Abu Dhabi: Commission for Academic Accreditation, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of the United Arab Emirates, 76–84.

Rienties, B. and Toetenel, L. (2016). The impact of learning design on student behaviour, satisfaction and performance: A cross-institutional comparison across 151 modules. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 60, 333–341.

Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Roberts, P. (2015). Higher education curriculum orientations and the implications for institutional curriculum change. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20 (5), 542–555.

Roth, W.-M. (2004). Activity Theory and Education: An Introduction. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 11 (1), 1–8. Available from https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1101_1.

Roth, W.-M., Radford, L. and LaCroix, L. (2012). Working with cultural-historical activity theory [Online]. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 2012. Available from http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1814 [Accessed 12 August 2018].

Russell, D., R. (2003). Looking beyond the interface: activity theory and distributed learning. In: Daniels, H. and Edwards, A. (eds.). *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Psychology of Education*. London: Routledge, 318–335.

Sabri, D. (2010). Absence of the academic from higher education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25 (2), 191–205.

Salmon, G. (2004). *E-moderating: the key to teaching and learning online*, 2nd ed. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Salmon, G. (2020). Covid-19 is the pivot point for online learning [Online]. *Wonkhe*. Available from https://wonkhe.com/blogs/covid-19-is-the-pivot-point-for-online-learning/ [Accessed 16 August 2020].

Salmon, G., Jones, S. and Armellini, A. (2008). Building institutional capability in e-learning design. *Research in Learning Technology*, 16 (2).

Saunders, M. and Machell, J. (2000). Understanding emerging trends in higher education curricula and work connections. *Higher Education Policy*, 13 (3), 287–302.

Seeto, D. and Vlachopoulos, P. (2015). Design Develop Implement (DDI)—A Team-Based Approach to Learning Design. *THETA: The Higher Education Technology Agenda.* 11 May 2015. Gold Coast, Australia.

Shay, S. (2016). Curricula at the boundaries. *Higher Education*, 71 (6), 767–779.

Shay, S., Ashwin, P. and Case, J. (2009). Editorial: A critical engagement with research into higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (4), 373–375.

Sloan, A. (2015). A Phenomenological Study of Computer Science Lecturers: Lived Experiences of Curriculum Design (Doctoral Thesis). Dublin Institute of Technology. Available from https://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1159&context=sciendoc [Accessed 28 July 2019].

Smith, R., Killen, C. and Knight, S. (2013). Using Technology to Improve Curriculum Design [Online]. *JISC*. Available from https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/using-technology-to-improve-curriculum-design [Accessed 3 March 2018].

Spencer, L. et al. (2014). Analysis: Principles and Processes. In: Ritchie, J. Lewis, J. McNaughton Nicholls, C. et al. (eds.). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: SAGE Publications, 269–293.

Staddon, E. and Standish, P. (2012). Improving the Student Experience. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46 (4), 631–648.

Stake, R.E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE.

Stark, J.S. (2000). Planning introductory college courses: Content, context and form. *Instructional Science*, 28 (5), 413–438.

Stefani, L. (2008). Planning teaching and learning: Curriculum design and development. In: Fry, H. Ketteridge, S. and Marshall, S. (eds.). *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education : enhancing academic practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Tam, M. (2014). Outcomes-based approach to quality assessment and curriculum improvement in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 22 (2), 158–168.

Tight, M. (2010). The curious case of case study: a viewpoint. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13 (4), 329–339.

Tight, M. (2012). *Researching higher education*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education.

Tight, M. (2015). Theory Development and Application in Higher Education Research: Tribes and Territories. *Higher Education Policy*, 28 (3), 277–293.

Toohey, S. (1999). *Designing courses for higher education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Trowler, P. (2008). *Cultures and Change in Higher Education: Theories and Practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Trowler, P. and Cooper, A. (2002). Teaching and Learning Regimes: Implicit theories and recurrent practices in the enhancement of teaching and learning through educational development programmes. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 21 (3), 221–240.

Trowler, P. and Knight, P.T. (2000). Coming to Know in Higher Education: Theorising faculty entry to new work contexts. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 19 (1), 27–42.

Trowler, P., Saunders, M. and Bamber, V. (2009). Enhancement Theories. In: Bamber, V. Trowler, P. Saunders, M. et al. (eds.). *Enhancing Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Curriculum in Higher Education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press / McGraw-Hill Education.

Trowler, P., Saunders, M. and Bamber, V. (eds.). (2012). *Tribes and Territories in the 21st Century: Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Trowler, P.R. (2005). A Sociology of Teaching, Learning and Enhancement: improving practices in higher education. *Papers: Revista de Sociologia*, (76), 013–032.

Trowler, P.R. (2016). *Doing doctoral research into higher education.....and getting it right*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

UCISA. (2018). *Technology Enhanced Learning Survey 2018 [Online]*. Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association. Available from https://www.ucisa.ac.uk/Resources/2018/Technology-enhanced-learning-survey [Accessed 3 December 2019].

Uden, L. (2007). Activity theory for designing mobile learning. *International Journal of Mobile Learning and Organisation*, 1 (1), 81–102.

University of Portsmouth. (2019). Curriculum Framework 2019/2020 [Online]. Available from http://www2.port.ac.uk/departments/services/academicregistry/qmd/curriculum-framework-2019-20/ [Accessed 19 January 2020].

University of Reading. (2017). *Curriculum Framework [Online]*. University of Reading. Available from https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/curriculum-framework/UoR_Curriculum_Framework_2018.pdf [Accessed 19 January 2020].

University of Sunderland. (n.d.). *Integrated Curriculum Design Framework [Online]*. University of Sunderland. Available from https://my.sunderland.ac.uk/download/attachments/104855931/UoS%20Curriculum%20Model%20i-design%20v1.1.pdf?version=2&modificationDate=1553701788000&api=v2 [Accessed 19 January 2020].

Usher, J. (2014). Demystifying the CAIeRO: Programme level design. *LearnTech*. Available from https://blogs.northampton.ac.uk/learntech/2014/12/24/demystifying-the-caiero-programme-level-design/ [Accessed 27 January 2020].

Usher, J. (2016). Demystifying the CAIeRO: Stages 3-5, let's get building! *LearnTech*. Available from

https://blogs.northampton.ac.uk/learntech/2016/04/25/demystifying-the-caiero-stages-3-5-lets-get-building/ [Accessed 2 February 2020].

Usher, J., MacNeill, S. and Creanor, L. (2018). Evolutions of Carpe Diem for learning design. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 11 (1).

Wang, L., Bruce, C. and Hughes, H. (2011). Sociocultural theories and their application in information literacy research and education. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 42 (4), 296–308.

Warren, D. (2016). Course and Learning Design and Evaluation. In: Pokorny, H. and Warren, D. (eds.). *Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education*. London: SAGE.

Weller, S. (2017). Using internet video calls in qualitative (longitudinal) interviews: Some implications for rapport. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20 (6), 613–625.

Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA.: ASCD.

Williams, J. (2011). Toward a political economic theory of education: Use and exchange values of enhanced labor power. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 18 (3), 276–292.

Williams, J. (2016). Quality assurance and quality enhancement: is there a relationship? *Quality in Higher Education*, 22 (2), 97–102.

Wilson, V. (2014). Examining teacher education through cultural-historical activity theory. *Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal (TEAN)*, 6 (1), 20–29.

Yamagata-Lynch, L.C. (2010). *Activity Systems Analysis Methods: Understanding Complex Learning Environments*. New York: Springer.

Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE.

Yin, R.K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE.

Young, C. and Perović, N. (2016). Rapid and Creative Course Design: As Easy as ABC? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 20 July 2016. Valencia, Spain, 390–395.

Young, C. and Perović, N. (2018). *Introduction to the ABC LD Workshop*. University College London and Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available from https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/abc-ld/home/abc-ld-toolkit/ [Accessed 2 February 2020].

Young, C. and Perović, N. (2020). ABC LD – A new toolkit for rapid learning design. *European Distance Education Network (EDEN) Conference*. 22 June 2020. Timisoara, Romania.

Ziegenfuss, D.H. and Lawler, P.A. (2008). Collaborative course design: changing the process, acknowledging the context, and implications for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 13 (3), 151–160.

Zurita, G. and Nussbaum, M. (2007). A conceptual framework based on Activity Theory for mobile CSCL. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 38 (2), 211–235.