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Abstract

This paper discusses the data obtained from an online survey of academic staff who are involved in module design and who are employed within one university. The survey was used as a base-lining tool to explore the nature of current module design practice within the survey sample. Do academics consistently employ the pragmatic approaches recommended by educational developers and theorists or is module and curriculum development a more informally constructed process? By comparing the initial findings of this project with survey and interview data produced by evidence-based projects, this paper suggests that module design practice is not set in stone and that we need a deeper analysis of the process of module and curriculum design in terms of social practice and socio-cultural theory in order to gain a deeper understanding of it.

Keywords: curriculum; design; higher education; questionnaire; theory;

1. Introduction

This paper has been written during the lengthy process of analysing qualitative interview data obtained during a research project which is investigating the module design practices of academic staff employed by one university in the UK. In its initial phase the project used a baseline online questionnaire to obtain data from university staff involved in module design. Guided by the project's main research question, which centred on the experiences of module design, the questionnaire was used to explore whether or not staff consistently use the pragmatic approaches suggested by educational developers and theorists or if module development is a more informal process. This is important, because

no matter how celebrated curriculum design models and theories are, they are inert if they are not being utilised.

The on-line questionnaire asked staff if:

- (a) individual or team approaches were adopted;
- (b) their conceptions of module design were influenced by any institutional, departmental, disciplinary or personal factors;
- (c) they took a logical linear approach;
- (d) design aids were employed and how and when they were used;
- (e) the process used to select assessment methods was influenced by factors outside of module design.

The research drew on the concept of 'situated practice' by embracing 'socio-cultural' theory, which is the way in which University personnel within departments and work groups interact (Bamber et. al. 2009).

One of the objectives of the project is to compare its findings with those produced by those who have also executed some base-lining (i.e. initial exploratory) exercises. For example JISC (a registered charity formerly known as 'Joint Information Systems Committee' that works on behalf of UK further and higher education to support the use of digital technologies) via its 'Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design' initiative (2010) has uncovered useful insights into the social practice and execution of curriculum design, particularly when changes to existing practice are proposed.

2. Background and Literature Review

Whilst the individual and collaborative processes and dynamics of module design practice in Higher Education are under-researched, there are a number of textbooks which signpost the process. Many curriculum design models and theories *appear* to be prescriptive, as they provide systematic and consistent routes for designers to follow (see Biggs 1996, Moon 2002). In other words, if you want to know 'how to do it', here is a model that can show you what to do. This widespread dissemination of models seems to resemble a pragmatic approach whereby the technique is being used to provide a solution. This is not a new concept as Crotty (1998, p.72) suggests that "*pragmatic approaches share a number of characteristics*" stating that "*efficacy in practical application – the*

issue of ‘which works out most effectively’ – somehow provides a standard” (Crotty 1998, p72).

Whilst design models can be useful, in that they can signpost the links between writing the learning outcomes, determining teaching methods and measuring the learned outcomes by assessment, the problem with a pragmatic approach is that it assumes two things:

1. if module and course designers are aware of design models they will use them;
and
2. the design models are effective.

One other issue is that what might work in an educational sense might not work for the practitioner. Indeed Bamber et al. (2009, p.9) have, when discussing design practices in higher education, suggested that there is an assumption that “*people on the ground will act in ‘logical’ ways*”. In other words module and curriculum designers will rationally follow guidelines in a ‘step-by-step’ manner. However the authors have also pointed out that “*this ... view of behaviour just does not stand up to scrutiny in University contexts*” (2009, p.9). This confirms Shaw and Jackson’s observation that “*in reality the process is complex, more iterative and messier than portrayed ... the decisions that have to be made by curriculum designers are not made in ... an idealistic vacuum*” (2002, p.2).

This was also something that the projects involved in the JISC ‘Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design’ initiative (2010) have openly observed. For example The Open University’s ‘Open University Learning Design Initiative’ (OULDI) project has referred to this as “*the gap between the formalised design processes and the often informal process of design*” (OULDI 2009, s.7). By asking academic staff how they approach programme and module design the University of Strathclyde ‘PiP’ (Principles in Patterns) project found that “*design practices are not currently co-ordinated ... and much design activity ... is tacit and undocumented ... it is extremely difficult to uncover all of the influences, institutional or otherwise, that determine the shape of tasks, modules and programmes ... and the design process*” (2010, s.4.1).

When examining the management of design the Open University found that “*There are no explicit formal OU learning design processes, rather it is embedded in course*

development in an 'ad-hoc' way" (OULDI 2010, s.6.1). As a result, the institution is steering course teams away from *"current ways of working to embrace a method for learning design"*. However, the project also found that *"design is based on academic experience of course development, or personal vested interest"* (OULDI 2010, s.6.1). Similarly, the baseline report produced by the University of Ulster (Viewpoints) found that *"Curriculum design is an ongoing activity, which can be driven by a number of different agendas (personal, module, course and institutional)"* (Viewpoints 2012, p.10). Some individual accounts (unrelated to JISC) also reflect the process of curriculum design. For example, in a contemplative paper which considers the development of a professional course for Chartered Surveyors, Fearon (2008, p.189) usefully suggests that in his personal experience, several factors (such as individual, institutional, educational and social influences) impact upon curriculum design. These help to situate design in the context of Learning, Teaching and Assessment, but like some of the work mentioned previously, Fearon concludes that the process is *"very much a 'balancing act'"* (2008, p.193). Nevertheless Fearon's account of his approach to curriculum design is valuable, since it explores what really goes on – not only 'out there' but 'in here', in other words within himself rather than within an institution.

Clearly the practice of curriculum design could benefit from some theoretical insights.

3. Theoretical Review

For some designers, curriculum models might be useful. However from the accounts given above we have seen that for other people such models might not be of any benefit. Greetham has used the analogy of weight loss diets to illustrate this situation in that the *"diet works for me but not for my friend"* (2006, p.78). Of course, an in-between view could be that design models can be usefully employed as a starting point in design, which can be individually tailored according to institutional, departmental, employer and student needs and contexts. With this in mind, the research project discussed in this paper partially rejected pragmatic approaches as a universal solution to discovering the process of curriculum design in higher education and considered if there could be a more helpful approach.

Bamber et. al's (2009) approach to the design and enhancement of curricula is entrenched within socio-cultural theory, and this offers a useful perspective through which to look at the process of curriculum design. The theory is a variant of 'constructionism' in terms of individual and social constructions which are influenced by social and cultural practices (Jaworski 1993). Bamber et al's understanding of the socio-cultural world of universities is that:

1. People within universities, departments and work groups interact and develop values, attitudes and practices which are, to some extent, unique to their social situation.
2. In their interactions they use artefacts and tools of various sorts which influence social reality in particular ways.
3. Discourses are mediated by deeper social forces and social structures, express social reality, and also operate to constrain and delimit it.
4. Individual identity or subjectivity is both shaped by social context and can itself work to shape it.
5. Histories of individuals, groups, the institution, and higher education as a whole will impact on enhancement initiatives in the present (all from Bamber et al. 2009, p.9).

The authors also suggest that because special and unique traits exist in *“every university, department and discipline, initiatives will be received, understood and implemented in ways which are, partly at least, unique and not generalizable”* (Bamber et al. 2009, p.9). These perceptions sit neatly with Gergen's view in that *“The terms on which the world is understood are social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people”* (1985, p.267).

We have already seen that some of the JISC projects have provided initial insights of influences in design practice by citing remarks such as 'academic experience', 'vested interest', and 'individual and social agendas'. The purpose of this project was to discover if experiences of module design were shaped by traits of socio-cultural theory, such as the values, attitudes, tools, social interactions, structures and contexts and any historical influences as suggested by Bamber et al. (2009) above. Indeed, like Bamber et al., Burr also acknowledges that *“the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use are historically and culturally specific”* and that *“it is*

through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of the knowledge become fabricated” (Burr 2007, p.3-4). Thus Burr, in her discussion of social constructionism suggests that social interaction of all kinds, and particularly of language, is of great interest. Indeed the *“goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed”* (Burr 2007, p.4). This suggests, perhaps, that module designers are part of what has been called a 'community of practice'. Wenger (1998) describes this concept as *“Members of a community informally bound by what they do together ... and by what they behave learned through their mutual engagement in these activities”* (cited in Rogan 2011, p.238). However, Mathieson (2012) found that within his research of Teaching, Learning and Assessment cultures between four different academic disciplines *“while dominant trends could be identified in different work groups, they did not always constitute a shared 'community of practice', and within work groups opposing perspectives were articulated by individual academics ...”* (p.562).

Indeed Bamber et al. comment that *“It is risky to assume that ‘communities’ are harmonious groups of like minded folk”* (2009, p.12) as people’s responses to curriculum design depends on the unique retrospective histories and social characteristics of each institution, department, team or individual. Nevertheless Burr (2007) continues to advocate that there are shared traits amongst social group members. When using the analogy of family characteristics, she suggests that *“there is no one characteristic borne by all members of a family, but there are enough recurrent features shared amongst different family members to identify the people as technically belonging to the same group”* (2007, p.2). This suggests that curriculum designers may share a kind of family resemblance with each other, although as we have already seen, some projects have not found any evidence of a common thread running through members of ‘the family’. Nevertheless the work by Bamber et al. is appealing as it suggests that the process of module and curriculum design could be a historical, social and or cultural perception understood by indigenous personnel.

4. Methods

The software used to execute the online questionnaire survey was *'Bristol On-line'*, which had been successfully employed in other projects undertaken within the university that is the focus of this study. Ethics approval for the project had been granted by the relevant research panel on 29 May 2012. A complete list of all 'academic' and 'academic-related' staff included on the respective email listings in June 2012 provided the sampling frame. Academic-related staff are those employed in professional, managerial or a support role such as a librarian, project manager or human resource officer. A hyper-link within the email introducing the survey provided direct access to the questionnaire.

As the questionnaire focussed on module design practice, the main population target was staff who were listed on the university internal e-mail list of 'academic staff'. However, those who were listed as 'academic-related staff' were also included in the sample because it was perceived that some of the latter group could have been involved with module design at some point in their career. Because both lists embrace an eclectic mix of job titles, the questionnaire was quite clear that it was aimed at those who were (or who had been) involved in module design.

It was difficult to quantify the exact number of staff who were sent the questionnaire as Human Resources (HR) do not keep numerical records of staff e-mailing lists, but information supplied by HR using a 'Staff Numbers by Job Family' datafile suggested that there were 372 'academic-related staff' and 586 'academic staff' listed on the staff files; a total of 958 individuals. In addition, there were 875 part-time hourly paid lecturers. However, from the researchers own experience, hourly-paid staff are not automatically added to the University emailing lists and many of them use private email addresses. It is also possible that many 'academic-related staff' would not be required to design modules and therefore they would not look at the questionnaire.

The total number of respondents was 96. This figure comprised 87 'academic staff' and 9 members of 'academic-related' staff. This response rate was therefore approximately 10% and is comparable to other surveys of this type. For example when using an e-questionnaire to investigate the attitudes of academic staff towards implementing inclusive teaching practice, Smith (2010) received 83 completed questionnaires out of 750 distributed. She acknowledged that *"the number of returned questionnaires were*

small but was large enough to run basic frequencies from” (Smith 2010, p.217). Nevertheless, it is conceded that the response rate is low and this limits how far the findings of this study can be generalized. This is something that is discussed further on in this paper.

The questions used in the survey were mostly ‘closed’ and of a quantitative nature (i.e. simple ‘tick-box’ answers) but a small number of open questions were also included. These latter questions elicited a surprising amount of qualitative data. Some of the requested data asked for descriptive ‘people features’ (eg. the employment status and teaching qualifications of the respondent) and information of the ‘what?’ ‘when?’ and ‘how?’ variety. A limited amount of recall was also elicited. The questionnaire was short (there were 18 questions) and not intrusive (very little personal information was requested) and could easily be completed in less than six minutes. However, it was never intended to be used as a tool for collecting ‘causal’ data.

One useful feature of the ‘Bristol-online’ package was that the resulting data was automatically aggregated and analysed as the survey progressed. Thus ‘counts’, ‘percentages’ and ‘correlations’ were produced by simply pressing a button. This helpfully dispensed with the need for data coding and input and thus speeded up the process of analysis. The resulting data can be transferred into other analytical programmes such as SPSS, but this was not deemed to be necessary for this study. In addition, and as the survey population was small, it was more appropriate, when analysing the resulting data, to cite the number of respondents rather than use a percentage (Denscombe 2003). The tables used in this paper have been taken from the ‘Bristol Online’ analyses and are kindly reproduced here with the permission of the BOS bos-support@bristol.ac.uk.

The dichotomous (yes / no) and multiple choice questions were used to “*encourage respondents to “come off the fence”*” (Cohen et al. 2011, p.383) but ‘don’t know’ and ‘other’ responses were included as alternative answers and space was provided for respondents to elaborate on such responses if they wished. Interestingly, it was these responses and the resulting qualitative comments and remarks that provided some of the richest data.

A criticism of this research could be that the resulting data (and its analysis) is not externally generalizable. Whilst issues of generalizability will depend on how far the survey population of this project “*is similar to others of its type*” (Denscombe 2003, p.36) the resulting data could be used as an estimation of design approaches which could be common to design teams within other institutions.

5. Results

Ninety-six people responded to the questionnaire. The vast majority of respondents (almost three-quarters) were lecturers or senior lecturers. Forty-two respondents acted as a Course or Programme Leader and 80 respondents acted as a Module Leader (39 of them were employed in both positions). Whilst the data for these two roles can be analyzed separately, for the purposes of this paper the results have been provided as one complete cohort, rather than dividing it between the two job roles.

Thirty two survey respondents taught 3-4 modules for the 2011-12 academic year, 25 taught 1-2 modules and 21 respondents taught 5-6 modules. Eight people taught 7+ modules. Most respondents (50) had been teaching in higher education for 8+ years. Eighty-three respondents had been involved in module design in higher education (3 people didn't answer the question) and out of these, 21 rated themselves as being 'very experienced' in module design and 37 claimed to be 'quite experienced'. The remainder considered themselves to be a novice. Table one shows that most of the respondents possessed some kind of teaching qualification that included an element of curriculum design.

Of the 83 respondents involved in curriculum design, 64 had experience of designing a 'new' module. Thirty-seven of these respondents had designed a new module in collaboration with others. Respondents could tick more than one box, indicating that they had experience of working both alone and in collaboration. Even so thirteen of respondents had only worked alone when designing a new module. Nearly all respondents (82) with some experience of module design had experience of adjusting or tweaking an existing module (i.e. one for which there was already a module descriptor).

Table two shows that the practice of module design was most commonly influenced by 'one's subject area' (75) with 'your own experiences of higher education' (56), 'subject

pedagogy' (54), and 'established team or school practice' (51) being the next most common responses. As this was a multiple answer question (respondents could tick more than one box) percentage scores have not been offered. 'External events, such as conferences and seminars' (30) and in-house 'awaydays' (10) were the least important factors. Twenty two respondents ticked the 'other box' and all of them expanded on this. These 'other' responses could be easily themed into 'educational research literature' (5), 'student feedback' (4), 'requirements of professional bodies' (4), educational training courses (3), 'attendance at course validating boards' (2) and 'research interests', 'external examiner feedback' and 'networking at conferences' (1 response each). Other cited influences included an *“awareness of good practice elsewhere in higher education”*, *“information that a module isn't working well”*, *“changing technologies”*, the *“nature of students”* and *“external factors, such as the length of time available to teach the module, which I have no influence over”*. Three comments related to the influence of 'socio-cultural theory' in that they inadvertently referred to personal histories and past experience. These were: *“many years of teaching, and learning what works and what does not work, given my individual style”*, *“past experience as a teacher and a trainer”* and *“previous employment in training design”*.

The data revealed that respondents used a variety of 'aids' to help them design curricula. Table three illustrates that discussions with departmental and school colleagues' was by far the most common tool (70), with the 'module descriptor template notes' (46) and 'team meetings' (34) being the next most important. 'Models of curriculum design', 'discussions with educational developers or learning technologists' and 'the internet' scored 27, 23 and 22 respectively. 'Workshops' (11) and in-house 'awaydays' (15) and 'how-to-do-it design books' (6) were used less frequently.

Sixteen people ticked the 'other' box, and 15 of these elaborated on this response. Some of the responses could be themed. For example: 'Professional body guidance/requirements' (3), 'Industry requirements' (2), 'Learning theories' (1). The more qualitative responses fell under three headings. The first was **'Personal histories and past experiences'** such as *“my own experience of how students learn and what they need to be taught”*, *“... I based my curriculum on thirteen years experience of giving IT*

*support to students – so I had a fair idea of what they needed to learn”, “common sense”, and “within the team there are many years experience and a module will align with the most appropriate teaching and learning philosophy”. The second heading was **'Interactions between university personnel'** and embraced “discussion with colleagues from within the university and from other institutions”, “learning from others by sitting on CARTS” (this comment is referring to curricula validating bodies). The third was **'Consideration of content'**, in that “in designing modules, I look foremost at the module content / research in the area, at the characteristics of the students who will be taking it, and at the resources available for teaching” and “the results of my own research, and reading of academic literature, which then becomes a template that I use to think through how best to get these ideas across”.*

As stated previously, 64 individuals had experience of designing a new module. Table four suggests that the point at which people start designing curricula varied significantly. Sixteen respondents said that they ticked the 'other' box. Thirteen of these latter respondents elaborated on this and much of what they wrote could be grouped into six themes. These were 'I start with the learning outcomes' (3), 'I start with the learning outcomes, but then go to assessment' (2), 'The syllabus' (2), 'Professional skills' (1), 'The aims' (1), and 'I don't use the template' (1). The most elaborate qualitative comments were written by one person who said that “*I start by designing the assessment in order to meet the learning outcomes. Then I write the module in order for students to be able to complete the assessment successfully (provided they mutually engage with the material!)*”. A further three respondents, who designed the module first and before using the template wrote “*I design the module, knowing what I want to teach, and then apply it post hoc to the template*”, “*I don't use the descriptor to design a new module – that's an academic process for me. I then complete the module descriptor from start to finish once I have the module design*” and “*I write the module first, and then adapt information to fit the template*”.

Most respondents (75) involved in module design said that they looked at other module descriptors within the programme to see if there is any duplication of curricula. Four people said that they didn't. The remaining respondents didn't answer the question.

When planning assessments, the majority of individuals (62) involved in module design said that this was something that they returned to throughout the process of design. Seventeen respondents said that they thought about assessment at the beginning of the process and only three people said that they planned the assessment at the end. Table five shows that the most important factors that people took into account when they considered the type of assessment that they would use. As is evident from the scores, respondents could tick more than one answer box.

Twenty one individuals ticked the 'other' box and all of them elaborated on this response. Eight of these respondents indicated that they considered the intended learning outcomes and two said that they considered 'the curriculum as a whole'. Eight respondents wrote qualitative comments that could clearly be grouped together under the umbrella of 'consideration of students'. These included *“something that will grip the students' imagination and that they will enjoy doing”*, *“student ability. Eg. using coursework where students consistently struggle with exams”*, *“student workload, practical considerations”*, *“students' learning experience and whether or not the assessment encourages a deep approach to learning”*, *“if the method will help me assess what the student has absorbed from the course”* and *“what will best assist students in absorbing the knowledge from the module so that they can build on it in their own practice”*.

Respondents were also asked which two factors were the most important to them when planning assessments. These were 'open' responses, and a number of qualitative comments could be grouped under three themes. The first was the '**Consideration of students**' and covered *“work that will interest the students”*, *“I start with what I want the student to be able to do, what I think they will enjoy / find valuable. However once those things have led to ideas, practicalities and what is allowed are actually the most important factors in determining which option is used in the end”*, *“primarily the extent to which the assessment adequately measures student progress in the module in a fair way”* and *“will this motivate the student? How can I make this as interesting as possible?”*. The second theme was '**Assessment**' in that *“will it do what it says on the tin – can students achieve the outcomes. What added value in there in the assessment type”* and *“the foremost factor in selecting the mode of assessment is the appropriateness of the*

*assessment for testing the knowledge and skills I am trying to develop through the module". The third theme was **Institutional Practice' and respondents** stated that "institutional practice sometimes feels restrictive, but I do feel that I have to stick to it (or problems at CART etc) so that is important, but not always in a positive way ...".*

The remaining responses could be tabulated into fourteen themes (see table six).

Respondents were asked if they had ever wanted to change the design of a module but did not go through with it. Thirty-seven people said that they had. When asked what stopped them from making the change, the most common cited reasons were limited resources (21), 'school/faculty procedures' (11), 'university regulations' (8) and 'reaction from course or programme leader' (5). As well as the options noted above, respondents were given an 'other reasons' box. This option was ticked by 11 people and their responses could be clearly divided into two camps. The first was '**Process related**' such as the "*amount of paperwork required*", "*the hassle*", and "*change is a slow and cumbersome process*". The second was '**Lack of time' or 'no time'**'. Five respondents wrote just these words, but one individual said "*workload – I have 13 modules now and can't update them all every year*". In addition, two respondents wrote that their reasons for not changing the design of a module were "*Lost interest*" and "*Need for application for professional body approval for changes (to) degree*".

6.1 Discussing the data from a theoretical perspective

As previously mentioned, the purpose of the questionnaire was, at base-line level, to see if staff experiences of module design were influenced by the traits of socio-cultural theory such as any unique values, attitudes, and practices. Other influences included the tools, social interactions and structures, individual identities and individual, group or institutional influences suggested by Bamber et al. (2009).

The question 'What influences your practice of module design?' was specific to socio-cultural theory. Although respondents could tick more than one box, the three options with the highest scores were 'your subject area', 'your subject pedagogy' and 'your own experiences of higher education'. The answer with the next highest score was 'established practice within your own school or team'. These responses, and at this stage of the

project, are seen to be akin to the individual and group practices, interactions, structures and identities mentioned in section three.

When asked about the aids (or tools) that respondents use to design curricula, five of the suggested answers could be interpreted as being related to the suggested 'discourses' mentioned by Bamber et al. (2009). These were 'discussions with departmental or school colleagues', 'discussions with educational developers or learning technologists', 'team meetings', 'workshops' and 'awaydays'. This was also a multiple answer question, but the answer with (by far) the highest score was 'discussions with departmental or school colleagues'. However 'workshops' and 'awaydays' were the responses with the two lowest scoring. This is interesting, since the latter social practices are more formally planned events whilst 'discussions with departmental or school colleagues' can be perceived to be less formal in nature.

The data also suggests that staff practice is influenced by retrospective histories as suggested by Bamber et al. (2009). There is also some indication that module designers are not always working in the linear fashion adopted by curriculum theorists, particularly when considering the mode of assessment. This is something that will be further investigated towards the latter stages of the project. However, there is some hint of consistency within some practices, particularly when respondents wish to change the design of a module but decide not to go through with it. When considering factors such as workload, available time and institutional practice, respondents exhibited recurrent features which could identify them as belonging to a particular group (Burr 2007) or community of practice (Wenger 1998 cited in Rogan 2011). However, the findings perhaps also pointed to the suggestions made by Shaw and Jackson (2002) and Mathieson (2012, p.562) concerning decisions not being made in an 'idealistic vacuum' and perspectives of supposedly shared communities work groups being voiced by individual academics. (p.562).

Whilst peoples' responses supported (in many instances) Bamber et al's. (2009) theoretical work, one particular pattern of responses stood out. These concerned the consideration of students. This was not really a surprise as other influences seen to be influential upon module design are learners outcomes and needs, the requirements of

professional bodies / future employers, other programmes and modules, the market and available resources (Beetham 2009). In addition, Anderson has identified “*five factors, namely policy, local context, societal expectations, research trends and technology, which have major influence ...*” (2011, p.71). These traits were, as seen above, also evident in the questionnaire responses, which suggests that 'socio-cultural theory' does not influence module design in isolation to everything else.

6.2 Discussion of the data against the JISC projects

This project has not replicated the methodologies employed within the JISC projects highlighted above. Nevertheless, their findings were useful when analysing the questionnaire data because a few of them have uncovered useful insights into the practice of curriculum design which could be loosely compared to the initial findings of this project. For example Birmingham University’s ‘Technology-supported processes for agile and responsive curricula’ project (T-Sparc) initiated a review of the current state of institutional processes and procedures which culminated in a product entitled the “*lived experience of curriculum design*” (T-Sparc 2009 s.2). The seventeen participants who were interviewed were academic staff who gave narrative accounts of their experiences of curriculum design as part of the project's 'base-lining exercise'. The resulting 'multi-media review' reported that 'drivers for curriculum design' “*often originated from workplace settings*”, and that “*the starting point (in curriculum design) was the consideration of the types of skills required by students in the workplace*”. However, unlike this project, their survey found that “*face-to-face meetings such as 'awaydays' were the most prevalent mechanisms for initiating design*” (all from T-Sparc 2009, ss.2-4). Whilst institutional policies and processes were not deemed to be significant in the design process, in common with this project, the building of relationships with other professionals, academics and team members *was* considered to be important (T-Sparc 2009 s.4). Only twenty-six respondents in this paper's project used a module descriptor template to help them design modules. Interestingly the T-Sparc project suggested that “*a context of tight adherence (compliance) to documentary requirements might not create the best environment to support innovation in curriculum design*”, although a small

number of participants felt that *“efforts to try to 'capture' the programme in formal documentation allowed for further clarification and ideas”* (2009 s.4).

When discussing the concept of ‘personal relationships versus design mechanisms’, Birmingham University observed that *“Relationships’ are seen to be far more important than effective ‘mechanisms’ in delivering good curriculum design. Policies and defined processes are not seen to contribute significantly to the curriculum design process”* (2009, s.4). Like the findings of this project, T-Sparc found that *“Building relationships – professional and even social with fellow academics... senior managers, students and external examiners are cited as being the most important factor in ‘getting the job done”* (2009, s.4). In addition, the consideration of students was also a design driver, in that *“there was a sense that the starting point was a consideration of the types of skills which might be required by our students when they enter post-university employment”* (T-Sparc 2011).

Finally, and in common with this project, Birmingham University found that whilst *“there was an understanding that programme documentation had a number of audiences (in theory), the crucial nature of satisfying the approval panel meant that documentation was written (almost exclusively) with that audience in mind”* (T-Sparc 2009, s.4). Indeed, T-Sparc also noted that *“a further issue is that institutions often place too much emphasis on the documentary artefacts produced by a process rather than the reflective processes themselves: (the) ‘focus on the products of curriculum design rather than the process of curriculum design distracts activity away from rich team discourse and innovative solutions to curriculum design challenges’.*

As part of its exploratory work The Open University conducted a 'Baseline Review' in 2009 which was executed via an online staff survey concerning attitudes and perceptions of e-learning. Data from the fifty respondents (out of 110 staff originally invited to participate) *“provided further insight into learning design at the OU”* (OULDI 2012, p.7). They remarked that *“... Around half believed it is becoming harder to understand how all the parts of planned learning and teaching fit together ...”* (OULDI 2012, p.7). Interview data was also collected, and in common with this project their data revealed that course designers generated ideas for learning activities from their own experiences of

personal encounters with colleagues and friends, conferences, workshops, past collaboration and experiences of other courses and institutions, and first-hand experience through the demonstration of another course (OULDI 2009b). Indeed lecturing staff *“revealed a diversity of practice in respect to what was considered when creating modules... there was no one sequence or method for using curriculum design tools”* (OULDI 2012 p.7).

Overall, the data from the above projects bear some similarities to some of the data produced by the online questionnaire used in this research, in that there are few established formal patterns of module design between the surveyed samples, although the majority of staff do tend to talk and interact with one another about it. In this respect, the data from this project supports the findings of the JISC projects in that there are no explicitly formal processes of design although there is some evidence of 'shared traits', as suggested by Burr (2007). It will be interesting to see if the initial similarities will continue to be seen when the interview data from this project is analysed.

7. Conclusion

The project discussed in this paper is interested in the practice of module design. It is also interested in whether this is a collective or individual phenomena. As stated previously, this research used an online questionnaire survey and follow-up interviews to investigate the processes and practices of design. At the time of writing this paper, only the data produced from the online survey had been analysed. The interview data had been collected, but it was in the middle of a long process of being analysed using a form of thematic analysis that leaned towards interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). It is anticipated that a paper outlining the findings of this latter stage of the study will be submitted for publication at a later date.

For now, and like the findings of the JISC projects before it, the data suggests that the practice of curriculum design is not set in stone and that, as suggested by the theoretical work of Bamber et al. (2009), individual, team and institutional practices are influenced by many things, including historical and social traits.

This paper introduced the idea that in a theoretical sense, that people are not necessarily following the consistent and pragmatic approaches suggested by design models.

However, in a 'real' sense, staff are “*dealing with matters with regard to their practical requirements*” (Thompson 1995, p. 1073). Thus whilst there are a few published evaluations of the various advantages and shortcomings of design models and theories (see for example Malan 2000, Prideaux 2003) and numerous ‘how-to-do-it’ design handbooks, perhaps we still need a deeper analysis of the process of module and curriculum design in terms of socio-cultural theory to gain a deeper understanding of it. Course leaders and lecturers have significant autonomy in module design so long as they don’t drift too far from general course frameworks (Bamber et. al. 2009) and therefore a working hypothesis could be that people will respond to a design approach in their own context rather than use it as a concrete model. Nevertheless, taking into account all that has been discussed, the work by Bamber et. al. (2009) has provided useful insights into the social world of universities, and provided the theoretical framework and reflexive questions to consider whilst working on a project of this type.

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