Binns, C. (2016) Under pressure: an exploration of the module design experiences of academic staff employed in one UK university. Journal of Further and Higher Education. [online]

Abstract

This paper discusses some of the qualitative data obtained from a small number (23) of semi-structured interviews of academic staff who are involved in module design, and who are employed within one UK university. Analysing the interview transcripts produced eight main themes. One of these themes was the perceived pressures or constraints on design. Using verbatim responses given by the interviewees, a discussion of the data used to illustrate this theme compares the findings of this project with those from the existing literature.

Keywords: curriculum; design; higher education; interviews; pressures; IPA

1. Introduction

This paper discusses some of the qualitative interview data obtained from a research project that explored the module design experiences of academic staff employed in one UK university. The project was executed during a period of social and economic change within higher education, and it employed an online questionnaire and qualitative semi-structured interviews to obtain data from academics involved in module design. This paper uses some of the data obtained from the twenty-three interviews.

By exploring the experiences of module design practice (rather than whole programme design) of staff employed at one UK university, the overall aim of the project was to discover what the reported influences and drivers of module design were. From an analysis of the qualitative data collected, many of the responses could be grouped under eight themes. One of these themes was 'pressures and constraints', and this forms the basis of this paper.

Before outlining the methods used to collect and analyse the data, the following two sections offer a

brief overview of related published works and an overview of the social and economic climate of higher education at the time that this research was carried out.

2. Related Published Works

Although there are several recently published studies of higher education programme design practice (for example Cross 2009, Cross et al. 2008, JISC 2010) the surveys employed by these studies were often used as starting points from which to discover the strategies that front-line staff (rather than managers) were adopting when they were designing curricula. They were employed in the preliminary stages of research projects, and generally covered different aspects of *curriculum* design, rather than individual *module* design. They included the testing and modifying of a number of prototypes of curriculum design models, or evaluating the usefulness and practicalities of new e-design tools. However, their conclusions were a useful backdrop to this project. For example, 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).

Kinman's (1998) questionnaire survey of 2,000 academic and academic-related staff looked at the 'sources of pressures from work'. This study focussed on the working conditions of staff, stress management, and perceptions of change within their institutions. The survey is almost twenty years old but it will be seen that the findings were, in a few instances, similar to some of those presented in this paper.

Goos and Hughes (2010), in their online survey of university course coordinators and module leaders, identified levels of confidence when developing aspects of assessment practice. Influences on practice included workloads, large classes and institutional assessment policies.

Coria et al's (2010) study employed a mixed methods examination of staff resistance to curriculum change. They found that one pressure was *"... the major observations made during the accreditation process and the possible tensions generated within institutions throughout the*

implementation of change" (p.247). Their research used questionnaire and interview techniques and the research sample were *"members of the academic community involved in accreditation processes"* (ibid. p.252). The respondents indicated that there were a number of reasons that could be used to explain why institutions had problems with implementing curricular changes (ibid. p.253) such as a lack of time, the lack of consensus between students and teaching staff which resulted in a mismatch of curricula, and tensions between teaching staff due to reduced human and financial resources.

Mathieson's (2012) study of 30 academics employed within a South African university centred on the socially situated work practices of university staff, and suggested that whilst there were varying characteristics between different learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) cultures and work-groups (or working teams), there was evidence of values, strategies and approaches to learning and teaching that were common across disciplinary boundaries between academics who were both delivering and designing curricula, and this was something that was echoed in this study.

Norton et al's (2010) UK in-depth interview study focussed on ten new lecturers participating in a two year post-graduate certificate programme in learning and teaching in higher education. The aim of the project was to discover if the contents of the programme aligned with their personal teaching and learning philosophies, and if there were constraints on these views. The responses were positive, but constraints included departmental and institutional bureaucracy and the conflicting roles of teaching and research.

Finally, Anderson's (2011. p.71) paper identified five factors deemed to be considerably influential upon curriculum design. These are the local context, expectations of society, technology, research trends and policy.

Despite there being some published findings around the more general subject of curriculum design practice, there was still a question surrounding the concept of how university staff currently design and review their *modules* and why they do it that way. Thus this was an important project because

university staff are designing and delivering module curricula, within the context of a programme, to a changing student audience who have differing expectations of higher education. By listening to the experiences of fellow module designers the author gained a better understanding of the real world experiences of staff who are employed within one UK institution.

The findings of this research will be evaluated against those produced by the JISC surveys and the published works outlined above.

3. A Perceived Climate of Change

Writing in the context of the changing needs of "learners, employers and professional bodies", and following the publication of the 2006 Leitch Review of Skills, Beetham identified that *"These require rapid and responsive approaches to design ... Institutions are also under pressure to streamline processes and make general efficiencies. And in a time of economic difficulty, institutions need to deploy all available information to ensure their curriculum offerings recruit well, retain learners, and develop graduates with relevant capabilities"* (2009 section B).

In October 2010, just as this project was getting under way, the 'Browne Report' (Browne 2010) proposed a radical restructuring of Higher Education by dramatically cutting central government funding for teaching and raising the cap on student fees. Commentators remarked that programme designers would have to review existing curricula so that Universities could remain sustainable (Deloitte, 2010). Financial issues such as maintaining or increasing the incoming revenue attached to students became a further challenge.

In response to this, and in the university in which this research took place, a number of institutional policies and initiatives have emerged, and mostly since 2012. For example there have been changes to the induction processes for all new students, and there has been an increase in the amount and types of student support made available via specialised academic support units. There have also been significant reform in terms of new programmes and the withdrawal of courses which have poorly recruited. In addition, module and programme leaders are more accountable via formal

annual evaluations of modules and programmes, and surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS).

There has also been an increased bid to increase the numbers of students entering higher education, and to fill courses. This phenomenon has resulted in bigger classes and students with more diverse backgrounds and educational experiences than in previous years, and it has impacted on the availability of staff time to be able to foster the staff-student relationship and on staff and institutional resources such as timetabling, the availability of suitable classrooms and library stock. These issues, along with sector recommendations such as those contained in the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiatives of the 1980s and the 1997 Dearing Reports, has prompted a revision of curricula. Indeed the current economic climate, which has resulted in a shortage of available graduate jobs has meant that programmes have increasingly been encouraged to implement elements of employability into the curriculum. In addition, the withdrawal of fee-funding and maintenance grants from 1990 onwards, and the current level of repayable loans has meant that many undergraduates are having to self-fund tuition fees of up to £9000 per year.

4. Methodology

Because this research investigated the staff experiences of module design in only one UK University, no claim can be made concerning the transferability of the study. However, and when examined alongside the data produced by other studies and established theory, this research provides a deep and rich insight into the experiences of module design.

4.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire survey was compiled from my own knowledge of module design, some input from the supervisory team, some findings from published works and also by working closely with the research questions. The survey could be completed in less than ten minutes. The questionnaire survey had three aims. The first was to produce a descriptive overview of current module design practice within the university of focus. The second aim was to provide a pool of responses that

would help to influence the questions that participants would be asked in the interview schedule, and the third was to elicit a sufficient number of volunteer interviewees for the next stage of data collection (the follow-up interviews). This was because volunteers for the qualitative stage of the data collection were recruited via the last question of the questionnaire survey, which asked respondents if they would like to participate in a follow up interview.

Staff who were listed in the 'academic staff' and 'academic-related staff' email lists in June 2012 (which are compiled by Human Resources) provided the criterion sampling frame. The institutional IT administrator electronically disseminated the survey, and the software used to implement the survey was *'Bristol on-line'* (BOS) which has been successfully employed in other projects undertaken within the university.

The number of survey respondents was 96. Data produced from the questionnaire survey has been published in a previous paper (Binns 2015) and is therefore not explored here.

4.2 The Interviews

Everyone who volunteered for this stage of the project was interviewed, and the number of interviewees totalled 23. The interviews were digitally recorded and took place on the University premises. With the exception of two interviews, all were conducted by 12 December 2012. There were five different Schools at the time that the research was executed, and from the opening interview question (which asks interviewees to describe their role in the University) it is known that there were at least three interviewees from each School, each having varying experiences, length of tenure, security of tenure and teaching / administrative responsibilities.

Semi-structured interviews were the preferred method of qualitative data-gathering because of the degree of control that could be exerted. The interview schedule was formulated over the summer of 2012 in tandem with the analysis of the questionnaire data. Two pilot interviews were conducted which resulted in some very minor modifications being made to the schedule. The schedule comprised of a short list of questions that each interviewee would be asked by using the same

format, but not necessarily in the same order, depending on their responses. Occasionally, an additional follow up question was used to explore an issue that the interviewee had raised, especially where it was specific to their discipline or module. Follow up questions were also used if issues raised by the interviewees contradicted the existing literature.

The interviews were a hybrid of 'topical interviews' and 'cultural interviews' (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p.31) in which the *"researcher looks for specific facts, descriptions of events, or examples, or examples that will help answer a particular, focused research question"* (ibid. p.31). This style of interview was instrumental in eliciting the rich data that emerged from the interviews. All the interviewees were allowed to talk at length without interruption and staff were interviewed randomly as the interview appointments were made according to each person's availability.

The shortest interview lasted 17 minutes and 44 seconds and the longest lasted just over 54 minutes. Most were of around 35 minutes duration. However, with the exception of two interviews, the shorter recordings produced as much data as the longer ones as some interviewees spoke very quickly.

4.3 Analysing the interviews – the initial stage

All of the interviews were transcribed by hand. Once all of the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, the transcripts were divided into three almost equal bunches of transcripts. This initial stage of analysis commenced in March 2013 and was a process of identifying the initial themes within the data whereby *"the researcher attempts to build a systematic account of what has been observed and recorded"* (Ezzy 2002, p.86). In this study, each transcript was treated in its own right and marginal notes were written to help the emergence of the themes and ideas which would inform the later conceptual stage of the analysis. One initial observation made during the course of these interviews was that the emerging data was not specific to any one group of staff.

The transcripts were inductively analysed by using a hybrid process of theming that leant towards Interpretive Phenomological Analysis (IPA). Approaches to IPA offer an examination of 'lived

experiences'. However, I did not always adhere closely to mechanics of IPA as set out by Smith et al. (2009). For example, whilst I did allow my interviewees to talk uninterrupted, the interviews were steered by the interview schedule and my prompts. In addition, and when analysing the interview data, I didn't use speech dynamics, or note every cough for example. However, I did note pauses, laughing, recurring phrases and the mood of the interviewee. In addition, and as IPA analysis involves reading and re-reading the data closely (ibid. 2009) I did make notes of my reflections and thoughts.

4.4 Tacit information and Bracketing

Because my analytical approach drew on interpretivism, the issue of my tacit information was part of the process. As Robson suggests, *"the 'conceptual baggage' you bring to your data (whether derived from a pre-existing theory or from an analysis of data collected earlier) will inevitably have some influence on what you are likely to 'see' in the data"* (2002, p.493). To counter this issue, Moustakas discusses the concept of 'bracketing' "*... in which investigators set aside their experiences as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon under investigation"* (Creswell 2007, p.59-60). It is widely acknowledged that bracketing out one's tacit knowledge and own experiences is difficult to do (Moustakas 1994, Creswell 2007) and as I am an established employee, it would have been extremely difficult for me to accomplish this successfully. Indeed, van Manen (1990 cited in Creswell 2007, p.62) states that it is impossible to do.

4.5 Analysing the interviews – the final stage

In May 2013, and following the data analysis, a table of eight themes and their corresponding sub-themes was finalised. The data was not examined in relation to gender, length of tenure, employment status or by academic discipline, as there were no clear differences in the responses that could be linked to such personal attributes. The eight themes were: 'pressures and constraints', 'assessments', 'the impact of the students on the practice of module design', 'documentation',

'alignment', 'working alone', 'working collaboratively' and 'guidance and qualifications'.

In some respects, the theme that forms the subject of this paper ('pressures and constraints') encroached into some of the other themes. This was particularly notable in the two themes embracing the 'assessments' and 'the impact of students on the practice of module design'. As such, it is anticipated that these two themes will be addressed in a future publication.

4.6 Interpreting the themes

IPA is an interpretative method of analysis, and the themes encapsulated the essence of each interview. At this point, psychological concepts can be employed in the analysis (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008, p.10) but as this project was not conducted within the discipline of psychology, this was not done. The themes, sub-themes and selected quotations were then used not only to describe the interviewees' experiences, but also as Cresswell suggests, to write a *"... a composite description that presents the 'essence' of the phenomenon ... Primarily this passage focuses on the common experiences of the participants ... the reader should come away from the phenomenology with the feeling "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that"* (Polkinghorne 1989, p.46 cited in Cresswell 2007).

4.7 **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the university research panel on 29 May 2012. All of the respondents knew that I was an academic staff member, but they also knew that the questionnaire data would be automatically processed by a computerised analytical programme (Bristol Online – BOS) rather than myself.

All of the interviewees were academic staff. Ten of the interviewees were known to me. Eight of these worked within various Divisions within the same School as myself (which consists of approximately 120 staff) but only one was a colleague who worked in the same field as me. Three people were loose acquaintances from different university Schools. All of the respondents were treated equally and they were all asked the same questions.

The interview questions were raised in a non-critical and non-confrontational manner, but also in a gentle fashion. A style of qualitative interviewing that is described as 'responsive interviewing' (Rubin and Rubin 2012) was also employed. This *"emphasizes the importance of building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that leads to more give and take in the conversation."* (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p.36).

5. Discussion of the interview data

Like the findings of the JISC projects before it, the initial questionnaire data from this study suggested that staff were not always being informed by evidence-informed approaches suggested by the educational literature, such as design models and threshold concepts, because in reality staff were approaching module design according to the social, personal and institutional contexts at that given time. In other words, approaches to design were more situation-informed. As previously mentioned, these initial findings influenced the design of the interview schedule.

Previous studies had already identified 'constraints' as being a driver in design practice, even if this means that they deter people away from doing something, rather than acting in a positive way. To explore this perceived issue, the interviewees were asked the following question:

"What do you see as the pressures or constraints that influence or affect the way that you design a module?"

A discussion of the data, which was located under the master-theme of 'pressures and constraints', is now presented by using nine sub-headings to structure it.

5.1 Workloads and time

When considering factors such as workloads and available time, the interviewees (as indeed the questionnaire respondents gave very similar and cohesive responses, which could attach them to a particular community of practice (Wenger 1998 cited in Rogan 2011) or an institutional culture. It will be seen in the discussion of this master theme that workload is a recurring issue which permeates throughout the data.

One of the findings of this study, which has not appeared in the other studies that have been cited, was that interviewees expressed experiences of regret and shame at not having the time to be able to do what one would like to do. Some of them also expressed that they were not happy with their work, and that quality issues had not been met. As such, the interview responses supported Kinman's questionnaire survey of 2,000 academic and academic-related staff (1998, appendix one), in that 29.6% of the 773 respondents 'strongly agreed' and 44.3% 'agreed' to the statement *"Lack of time forces me to compromise the quality of my work".* This study is almost twenty years old and it is interesting that the findings were similar to some of those presented in this study. Similarly, 14.7% of Kinman's 775 respondents 'strongly agreed' and 44.4% 'agreed' with the statement "I don't have time to plan and organise my work properly" (1998, appendix one). In this study two interviewees said:

"yeah, I did the XX module mmm … it was all done very, very quickly last year because the tutor that was supposed to do it went off sick and so it was given to me and I had about two weeks to sort it out. So last year I wasn't overly happy with it ..." (T1,1,11)

"I guess what I'm ashamed of is that I design the assessment around my workload and what I can cope with, rather than what could be best for the module and I admit to that. I think that there are better things like an assessment process that we can follow that I just don't have the capacity to do. I don't have the capacity at the moment and I don't have the skills". (T3,5,159)

A number of important words appear in the above extracts, which include 'ashamed', 'cope' and 'capacity'. These interviewees suggested that they knew that what they were doing fell below their own expectations of what they should be practising. However, just because they expressed that they feel shame and regret does not mean that it was regretful or shameful. As the issue centred on things that they would like to do, or were necessary to do, but in reality they couldn't do, it was an individual and personal mark of what they perceived to be quality work, although how they benchmarked their own quality is not known.

One interviewee spoke about the coping strategy that s/he had adopted, and centred on flexibility:

"You might not think or have time to think too carefully about a mixture – erm so I would say you tend to be as – leave it as flexibly for you as possible – you don't want to put yourself into a straight-jacket with a module descriptor in case you know there's things you've not considered in that short space of time". (T15,2,45)

The issue of writing module documents loosely to cover all eventualities is something that is revisited later in this discussion.

Interviewees were asked if their experience of module design was different if they worked within a very limited time-frame. It became clear that one of the key issues related to a perceived lack of time is reflection. This response was typical:

"… I've had to sort of put together everything that I was going to present from scratch and do that very rapidly – yeah. Over a couple of days – yeah so I've done that before … you can't work in such a considered way, you haven't got time to reflect on what you're putting together is as robust and as rigorous as you'd like – it's hard to get a good alignment between what you're teaching and what the learning outcomes are …Yeah, it's different in that sense, because you haven't got the luxury of all the time to er – I find it more helpful when I have got time to let things lie a bit and come back to it with a fresh pair of eyes and I can't do that if I'm under a tight deadline, so I'm sure that affects the quality of work produced as a result. (T19,2,38)

One issue around why experiences concerning quality issues might occur was raised by one of the interviewees. This person spoke about how, in his/her experience, module design was not seen (by other people) to be important, or as important as other things, which meant that there was less time being allocated to the task:

"I actually don't think we ever really get enough time to design a module … Which isn't helped by the fact that people don't really see it as important **...** *that there's very little time or incentive to sit down and reflect on modules and come back to it ... so my teaching load this year is ridiculous – I'm*

doing 14 hours per week, and with 14 hours a week there's simply no time to reflect after every day, or after every couple of sessions on how it's going ... so I think that's a big one, but also I think the pressures that all ends of the academic year are increasing, so even if you don't have time to reflect as you go through the semester ..." (T13,4,125)

This interviewee mentioned the concept of reflection three times. That s/he felt unable to do it adequately was put down to the lack of available time. However, and despite the above comments, another interviewee said that having a limited amount of time had a positive effect on their module design. This person was using module design as an opportunity to manage their workload:

"I don't always think about these time pressures in a negative way because it does lead you to think a bit more creatively ... about how to do things because then you have to think about a bigger range of assessments ... 2-3 hour lectures are not on anyway, so how do you give them an experience of other forms of working that will give them a meaningful experience that is also a time friendly thing for you as well". (T4,3,76)

Nevertheless, not only did interviewees state that a lack of time dampened their enthusiasm to review or design a module, but also that coping strategies such as working beyond one's contractual hours were employed just to cope with their existing workload. For example, one interviewee said:

".... I've got to sit and mark 180 assignments and given that we have to give feedback within four weeks erm I've designed it so they're handing it in tomorrow because that gives me that extra one week over Christmas which I will have to do some marking in, because you know, I am on annual leave, but I've got to do it, so it's just giving myself an appropriate time really to do it". (T22,4,108)

The above responses reflected previous studies concerning drivers of curricula. In their baseline review of curriculum design, the JISC University of Birmingham T-Sparc project noted that when attempting to collaboratively design curricula, *"Staff are under a lot of pressure with their workloads as it is, which makes it exceedingly difficult to get everybody together to spend sufficient time thinking things through"* (T-Sparc Blog 2012 – 'time and space for design'). In addition, one

interviewee (a course co-ordinator) from the Goos and Hughes (2010) study said *"I don't want assessment support. What I want is adequate time to do my job, without excessive and ridiculous bureaucratic demands from central administration"* (2010 p.321).

5.2 Resources

In his study of academic staff, Anderson (2011 p.72) noted that *"the changing times and student context means that staff are under pressure to be more innovative and scholarly … Finally the design of the curriculum needs to be considered in the light of available and perhaps changing financial, material and human resources".*

In this study, people's experiences of being innovative manifested itself as a necessary approach to design and review. For example, and to avoid future resource issues, module descriptors were written very loosely (avoiding a 'straight-jacket' as one interviewee suggested) and flexibly. Such experiences were similarly documented in the study by Coria et al. (2010).

'Staffing implications' and 'timetabling' were interpreted in the data analysis as being located under the wider umbrella of 'resources'. The following statements from two of the interviewees in this project, and concerning limited resources and their effect on design and review, embraced much of what other interviewees were saying:

"So I think pressures are around resource, academic staff, the nature of those academic staff, how much external resources you might need to bring into that in terms of people etc ... In the end it comes down to money one way or another". (T20,3,94)

"... my primary determinant - what will determine module tweaking is resources. What do I need to run this module at it's most efficient, and I find that a bit of a tragedy really. That is it – that's what determines it now. If I choose to do this innovative assessment how much extra work will that take me and if it would take a lot of extra work I wouldn't do it." (T23,1,31)

One interviewee spoke about his/her observations of other colleagues who refrain from enhancing the programme curricula (which is a part of their work duties) because there are limited resources:

"... most of it is driven by resource, not by any great educational desire or aim to do the best for us and to do the best for students ... I mean I personally don't have a desire to write a new module at the minute, but I can think of team members who given an opportunity would want to write some elective modules ... to my mind they are being held back from writing new modules and that is resource driven and seems a shame." (T23,4,130)

This statement is supported by Kinman's (1998, appendix one) survey, which revealed that 58.7% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'my performance at work is compromised by a lack of resources' and also suggested that many interviewees cited the accessibility (or not) of resources as being a main consideration in the process of designing modules.

5.3 Class size

Five interviewees loosely spoke about how the class size (which they considered to be large) had adversely affected their availability of time, assessment design and marking time. These comments related to the workload of the interviewees. Whilst the issue of class size impacted negatively on module design, it was most evident when interviewees were discussing the assessment. Two common experiences to address this issue were to strategically either design the assessment around the class size, or to not have the time to spend on marking the assessments properly (as experienced by the interviewee).

5.4 The institutional validation process

Apart from the issues of time, one of the most cited constraints in this study was the institutional module validation or approval process. One suggestion made by a participant of the T-Sparc project was that *"historically what has happened in design has been principally governed by deadlines, compliance with process and the set piece occasion is the Approval panel"* (2012, Blog - Audience).

In the institution researched in this study, the required documents for *programme* approval are read

and commented on by an internal validating body. However these documents also include the module descriptor templates which are used to demonstrate the purpose and design of an individual module. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned this body during their interview, as it features in the everyday module design process, but some interviewees specifically mentioned the internal validating body when asked to talk about what they conveyed as a constraint on module design. The following extract was typical:

"... there's a lack of consistency – if you're putting together a new module there always seem to be inconsistency about what you're expected to do, what's necessary to get the module approved and what's not needed. So going through the whole designing a new module and putting it through XX (internal validating body) *was a bit of a nightmare really ... one of the pressures was a lack of consistent information about what was needed, which put me under pressure as a result ..."* (T19,2,67)

The findings from this study were contrary to the T-Sparc 'Blog on 'Baseline Review' (2012) in which the validation processes were seen to have a positive impact on design as in this study not one interviewee spoke favourably about the validation process, despite acknowledging that it is a necessary one. Rather, they supported the study by Norton et al. (2010) in which one of their interviewees said that the module proposal documents *"... are set in stone ... I think that hurdles of going to various panels to have your module changed puts people off ... I get the impression from talking to colleagues that the process is long-winded and bureaucratic"* (p. 354).

5.5 Marketing

This study revealed that there are other 'institutional' processes which can impact on module design and review. One interviewee suggested that marketing of programmes was at the forefront of his/her mind. S/he commented on:

" ... the freshness of that module. You know how current is it, how up to date is it – how leading edge etc and you know, that's research isn't it, that's seek and retrieve er so that might be pressures

on you, how much, how much are you kind of stepping out into the unknown maybe around some of that – er – and that unknown could create problems at the validation or problems with the process of delivering it etc – do you know what I mean by that? (interviewer answers 'yes') *Erm – so I think that's another pressure – how brave and bold do you want to be or how much do you want to, to tread assured ground?"* (T20,3,105)

This interviewee elaborated further by explaining that module design didn't always mean that one could design a module that would be exciting for the designer:

" ... okay it's not necessarily about having sweeties in the shop window cos sometimes people need cod-liver oil ..." (T20,7,222)

5.6 Institutional time-scales and cultures

Some interviewees spoke about how the institutional time-scales employed to make curricula changes impacted negatively on his/her module reviews. One person remarked that:

"*Well the main one that drives me crazy is the time-scales because we're expected to review module descriptors in May before we even teach modules and if it's semester two modules or link modules and that to me seems ridiculous. It drives me mad. You can't review a module properly before you finish teaching it but we're expected to and we're expected to submit module changes before you've even finished teaching it and I don't think that's the right way to do it. (laughing) I'm probably not the only person that thinks that but ... (laughing) ... it's just not logical to do that – even if I didn't have the PGCHE* (a teaching qualification) *I would still think that. It is illogical to review a module before you've got the feedback or done the assessment or got the results – it's crazy."* (T2,2,56).

In contrast, another interviewee thought that institutional time-scales (or deadlines) were a positive driver of design, and ensured that reviews occurred in a timely manner:

"I think the fact that there are deadlines are quite useful because it – if we remember that there are deadlines and we use them as a prompt as a trigger to say okay it doesn't need changing. Without them, then two things: A. you just get organic drifting in the sense that you change every time

something changes or B. the descriptors never get changed at all …" (T17,3,94)

With respect to institutional 'top-down' culture, one interviewee expressed that the knowledge and teaching skills required to articulate module design are not valued institutionally, and that the research culture was more important. S/he said:

"When I did my PGCHE (an in-house teaching qualification) *I think it was made very clear to me that teaching excellence and curriculum design and all those elements are very much valued ... and think it is something that as an institution we might be moving away from. And then because there's a change in the sector and certainly the REF has just become the be all and end all Holy Grail for academics now."* (T16,8,249)

This conveyed experience of the focus on the importance of active research affected the attitude of this interviewee, which in turn shaped their perceived identity and worth as a practitioner. This was something that was echoed in the study by Norton et al. (2013) who found that privileging research over teaching excellence was a common practice in universities. This was an interesting observation, as this overlapped with the finding that about a third of the interviewees in this study said that one of the pressures on module design was having to take on modules which were not associated with their research or knowledge base, although they wanted them to be. In other words, they wanted their modules to be research-informed.

5.7 Subject expertise

The expressed pressure of a lack of 'subject knowledge' was described by a number of interviewees as being something that concerned them, and it was something that they considered in the design process. To help with this issue, one interviewee suggested that the research interests of new academics should be embraced into the curriculum because:

"... when young academics come in, and take over modules, that ... have been taught by academics that have left or retired – I think that's really bad practice, because they are coming into take over a curriculum that's not theirs" (T4,5,150)

This extract came from an interviewee who was referring to examples where personal subject areas and research expertise were not always being utilised. This view coincides with the findings of Norton et. al. where they found that *"the conflicting roles of research and teaching were also a major issue facing those new professionals"* (2010 p.345).

In some instances, interviewees stated that there were only one or two persons with a particular specialised knowledge, who could leave the university at any time, and thus modules were written with this in mind. One interviewee remarked that:

"We deliberately design modules in such a way that there is a number of academic staff involved in it ... staff function a lot better when we have more than one member of staff with adequate expertise in more than one area because what we don't want and we have suffered this before is when … a critical member of staff is all of a sudden not there any longer and it leaves an enormous hole, and it's too late to start planning for it …" (T6,4,105)

In this study, there was a tension between offering robust, resilient and durable modules which are also responsive to staff expertise. About a third of the interviewees confirmed what one of the above interviewees said, in that one of the pressures on module design was having to take on modules which were not associated with their knowledge base. One interviewee commented that:

"It wasn't my (knowledge) *area in XX (subject), yet nevertheless I was asked to write descriptors for them – erm and I did that, because I was asked, on the proviso that if the course was to run I wouldn't be expected to be the one that teaches the module ... I'm glad the programme doesn't run because actually I wouldn't have any faith in not being the person that has to teach it … I personally find it very difficult to think about ways of engaging good students or ways of engaging the different forms of assessment if I don't know the subject area …"* (T23,3,69)

One interviewee spoke about his/her comparative experiences of designing a module that was associated with his/her research compared to one that was not research related:

"Well the first semester I was taking over the XX module … so I do all of that module because it is

related to my research interests. So I find it more enjoyable doing it, in terms of changing and updating it ... I've been able to put in examples, put in new stories that are relevant – I think it's really important, especially with XX (subject) to give concrete, tangible, actual examples we can begin talking about.... I had existing connections, so we've had a lot of guest speakers coming in which have made things more enjoyable – which again I struggled to do in my other module ... I tried very hard to make it good, because I didn't want the students to feel they'ed really been short changed ..." (T9,2,42)

This interviewee was articulating what s/he likes to do, rather than what they can do. S/he was talking about the adjustment to the reality of their professional duties versus their expectations of being a new academic. Although three interviewees did talk about how they were able to design modules around their knowledge or research area, for the majority of interviewees, the fact that their research and modules had little in common was conveyed as a constraint.

The accounts of how subject knowledge (of both the interviewees and of their colleagues) impacted on design in the university of focus for this study, conflicted with the study by Mathieson whereby *"there was a tendency to build the curriculum around the research strengths of academics, with disciplinary specialisations favoured over curriculum coherence"* (2012, p.554). In this study, and in line with the views of Becher and Trowler (2001) there was evidence of building a curriculum around a sparsely populated knowledge base.

5.8 Student needs

Student needs were at the forefront of almost all of the interviewees minds when they talked about 'pressures'. This affected the overall design of the module by embracing assessment, subject content, 'levels' and teaching strategies. For example, a number of interviewees suggested that they felt that a pressure upon module design was having to accommodate the needs of 'students who shouldn't be here'. Indeed, accommodating the needs of students entering higher education compared to perhaps those who were a student say 15 years ago was, in this study, a very obvious driver of design in that

it was commonly implied by the interviewees that bright and able students made their work much easier.

In Mathieson's study, one academic *"spoke of the threat posed to academic standards by the quality of large numbers of educationally disadvantaged students gaining access to university"* (2012, p.554). In this study one interviewee said:

"... the students struggle and you expect them to struggle because they're not technically motivated if you like or not in that kind of arena, and that becomes quite difficult because you start to think well, I've got an issue here of students who may not pass if they have to be on the module, but I don't want to dilute what I'm doing for the students that would really benefit from this kind of module. So ... yeah that's difficult, that's another constraint we found with certain modules". (T15,2,62)

The above quote could be re-framed in that staff feel unable to offer adequate support to students given the resources that they have. If that is the case, then this was an additional example of staff being asked to do more with less resources.

All of these interviewees were referring to the changing profile of students and how they had to adapt their curricula to accommodate this. None of the interviewees were actually complaining, or making unfavourable comments about these students. Rather, the comments were made in a context of acceptance, in that it was just something that academics were expected, and were also expecting to have to do.

5.9 Failing students

In this study, two interviewees spoke about their experiences of having to increase the pass rate and how they didn't feel comfortable with this. However, and like the study by Mathieson (2012), these interviewees said that they didn't want to dilute what they were doing for students and suggested that the pressure to pass students came from 'above' (institutionally) rather from the students themselves. One of the interviewee in this study said:

"Yeah, well (laugh) the whole kind of pass / fail thing that politically it would be very incorrect to fail any of the students; it's kind of made quite clear to me that erm if students fail, it's not so much of a reflection on the students but a reflection on delivery and content and that sort of thing ... so it's that kind of pressure ..." (T1,3,77)

This interviewee talked further about the pressure that this approach (which concerned the assessment practices operating within a professionally validated degree) had on him/her:

" … *I don't like it at all and the reason why I don't like it is because - if we don't stretch them - how do we know (pause) and to teach people to write academically - to be able to critically analyse what they are reading and what they are actually writing and how their attitude and how they affect - you know - their clientèle. This whole kind of circle of stuff that goes on and I think that's wrong because then you end up with the wrong people doing the wrong job. You know - why, why do we do that – it's wrong, that is wrong, and I don't like setting people up to fail either – I don't want people to fail – I don't want to set the margin too high so that they do fail, but I don't want to feel like - erm - I'm not actually testing their abilities. Yeah - that's quite difficult".* (T1,3,88)

7. Conclusion

Overall, this theme impacted greatly on the findings of this study. All of the questionnaire respondents and follow-up interviewees had something to say about what they thought were constraints and pressures upon design. The quotations used in this paper are a selection taken from the resulting data from a study set out to discover the module design experiences of academic and academic-related staff at one UK university. Many of the expressed experiences were not just about feeling time starved, they were also indicative of people feeling guilty and uncomfortable.

These were drivers in design in that they directly impinged upon or dictated module content, teaching methods, and in many cases, the choice of assessment. Responses to these drivers often appeared to manifest themselves as strategies that were used to address the design process, rather than to progress it.

Throughout the interviews, many of the personal accounts centred on workloads and 'time' (or the perceived lack of it), a lack of resources, large class sizes, the institutional validation process, marketing, institutional time-scales and cultures, subject expertise, student needs and failing students. These experiences had a number of effects on the experiences of design, as recalled by the interviewees. For example, a number of staff spoke about how such constraints were, in their view, affecting the quality of their modules, and/or the paperwork associated with them.

In general, the data sat well with the findings of other studies, in that it supported most of what has already been found. However, the project also uncovered some experiences which were not expected, such as interviewees perceived observations of practice (particularly around 'passing' students) and perceptions of shame and regret in not being able to meet their personal expectations around quality.

For a future study, it could be worthwhile interviewing staff so as to look at themes that were hinted at, such as how some perceived pressures or constraints actually inspired more creative approaches to design. Interviewees were not afraid to tell it how it really is. Thus by using unstructured interview techniques, rather than the semi-structured approach employed in this project, interviewees might reveal further insights around the more positive strategies adopted to cope with time pressures, limited staff resources, the academic abilities of students and teaching unfamiliar subjects.

Whilst the findings of this research are limited to one UK university, they enrich our understanding of the experiences of module design by both affirming and offering new insights into the existing body of knowledge associated with this field. Twenty years ago commentators such as Bradley (1994, p.13) were predicting that *"... university staff and students need accommodation, library resources and laboratory equipment. Everyone needs time, a commodity that is being squeezed out of the system by the increasing bureaucratic and financial demands imposed by government education policies".* There is always something else to do, whether it is administration, teaching,

tutoring, meetings or university marketing days to attend.

One thing to consider is 'forward direction'. With regards to the institution employed in this study, the author (at the time of writing this paper) has offered to meet with members of senior management so that the situation may be acknowledged. Further research is planned so that the situation might be improved in some way.

The context of higher education is a different environment to what it was ten, five, or even two years ago, and it is likely that the environment will change further. Academic staff are receiving different signals from students, the institution, external stakeholders, and future employers. More than ever, degree programmes and the modules within them, need to be marketable, sustainable, attractive and academically challenging. This paper concludes by suggesting that module designers employ a stoical approach to the process, even when their views, attitudes and experiences around the rights and wrongs of the design process are questioned.

Bibliography

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

Becher, T., Trowler, P. R (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Beetham (2009) *Synthesis Report: Base-lining the Institutional Processes of Curriculum Design – JISC Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design programme*. Available at: www.jisc.ac.uk/learningprogramme (Accessed: 24 February 2013).

Biggerstaff, D., Thompson, A.R. (2008) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Qualitative Methodology of Choice in Healthcare Research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5(3), pp.214-224

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*. Special Issue entitled: The experience of being a lecturer in further and higher education. September 2015. Vol. 39, No.5, pp.758-775.

Bradley, S. (1994) Cash fuel for frames of excellence, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 6 May, p.13.

Browne, Lord John (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education – an Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*___Available at: www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report (Accessed: 15 November 2010).

Coria, M, M., Deluca, M, Martinez, M,E. (2010) Curricula Changes in Accredited Undergraduate Programmes in Argentina. *Quality in Higher Education*, 16:3, pp.247-255.

Creswell, J.W. (2007) *Qualitative Enquiry and Research Design – choosing among five approaches.* 2nd edition. California: Sage.

Cross, S., Conole, G., Clark, P., Brasher, A., and Weller, M. (2008) Mapping a landscape of learning design: Identifying key trends in current practice at the Open University. *2008 European LAMS Conference*. Cadiz, Spain, 25-27 June 2008. Available at: http://oro.open.ac.uk/id/eprint/18640 (Accessed: 8 May 2014)

Cross, S. (2009) *A Review of Curriculum Design at the Open University 2008-9: OULDI-JISC Project Baseline Report*. Available at: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/curriculumdesign (Accessed:23 June 2011).

Deloitte UK. (2010) *Spending review 2010-Education.* Available at: www.deloitte.com/view/en_GB/uk/industries/government-public-sector/spending-review/ (Accessed: 2 November 2010).

Ezzy, D. (2002) *Qualitative Analysis: Practice and Innovation*. London and new York: Routledge.

Goos, M, Hughes C. (2010) An investigation of the confidence levels of course/subject coordinators in undertaking aspects of their assessment responsibilities, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,* 35(3), pp.315-324.

JISC. (2010) Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design [online]. Available from http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/curriculumdesign.aspx (accessed 24 September 2010).

Kinman, G. (1998) *Pressure Points: A survey into the causes and consequences of occupational stress in UK academic and related staff.* London: Association of University Teachers.

Mathieson, S. (2012) Disciplinary cultures of teaching and learning as socially situated practice: rethinking the space between social constructivism and epistemological essentialism from the South African experience, *Higher Education: the international journal of higher education and education planning,* 63(5), pp.549-564.

Moustakas, C. (1994) *Phenomenological Research Methods.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Norton, L., Aiyegbayo, O., Harrington, K., Flander, J., Reddy, P., (2010) New lecturers' beliefs about learning, teaching and assessment in higher education: the role of the PGCLTHE programme, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* vol.47(4), pp.345-356.

Norton, L., Norton, B., Shannon, L. (2013) Revitalising assessment design: what is holding new lecturers back? *Higher Education,* 66(2), pp.233-251.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1989) 'Phenomenological Research Methods' in Valle, R,S. Halling, S. (eds) (1989) Existentical Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology. New York: Plenum Press.

Robson, C., (2002) *Real World Research.* 2nd edn. Blackwell, Malden, USA

Rogan, J.M. (2011) Bridging the educational research-teaching gap: Curriculum development Part 2: Becoming an agent of change, *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 39(3), pp. 233-241.

Rubin, J.R., and Rubin, I.S. (2012) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data.* Los Angeles: Sage

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretive Phenomological Analysis: Theory, Method, Research,* London: Sage.

T-Sparc (University of Birmingham). (2012) *T-Sparc Blogs – Findings and Observations (Audience, Baseline Review, Co-ordination, Compliance, Availability of Information, Representation,*

Stakeholders and Specialised Language, Time and Space for Design). Available at: http://blogs.bcu.ac.uk/tsparc/t-sparc-baseline-review/findings-and-observations/special (Accessed 22/02/2013).

Van Manen, M. (1990) *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Viewpoints (University of Ulster). (2012) *University of Ulster Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design Institutional Story* July 2012. Available at: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/curriculumdesign (Accessed: 23 June 2011).

Wenger, E. (1998) Communities of Practice: Learning as a social system, *Systems Thinker.* June 1998.