Designing business curricula: building relevance into higher education

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Abstract

Universities – in the UK and elsewhere – are caught on the horns of a dilemma: they need to innovate in course design, but have little or no money available for speculative investment in new programmes. This paper presents an approach to curriculum design that links the pedagogical concerns of quality standards and knowledge creation to the commercial imperatives of funding and development of third-stream income. Drawing in part on Whittington's classification of theories of strategy, it suggests an emergent process serving multiple outcomes in a low-cost, low-risk model. It also addresses in outline the issues of assessment and teaching and dealing with the potential loss of coherence in such an approach.

Keywords: curriculum design; higher education; business education; evaluation; assessment

Introduction

In the real world of higher education (HE), the power of the purse lies just below the surface of many decisions on curriculum design. On the one hand we wonder: Is there really a market for this course? On the other, we ask: Does this project meet the academic standards we wish to uphold? Once we satisfy ourselves in both regards – or decide to suspend judgement for a while – we face the need to get on with the work of designing the programme. There we meet a variety of approaches aimed at wrestling with the bureaucracy of the university and external imperatives of quality standards, government declarations, rules and regulations. Courses need to win internal approval and external validation, and to get there we must jump hurdles set up by subject standards boards, inter-departmental liaison committees and resource allocation planners. The academic looking to create something new could easily lose enthusiasm for the project. Worse, the university might lose the advantage first-movers usually accrue to more nimble commercial organisations that might add less value but capture the market.

These issues will rise to the fore as universities follow the advice contained in the research on the future of business education in the UK from the Advanced Institute for Management (AIM) Research (2006), which sought to direct us adopt clear positioning in the increasingly competitive marketplace, where training companies and other non-universities can now apply for degree-granting status. The AIM Research paper suggests four broad orientations (Social Science, Liberal Arts, Professional School, Knowledge Economy) that a business school might take. For many, especially those with limited access to traditional research funding, this advice will lead to growing focus on a 'professional' orientation with its emphasis on organisational impact and the implication may well be to move even closer in a commercial direction.

This paper suggests a model for programme development aimed at retaining the best features of peer review to ensure the academic purpose of a plan while providing a clearer business justification for the effort. It is particularly aimed at the development of professional courses that aspire to be more than the industrial training that was once the main substance of business education, and still informs many commercial and vocational courses.

Curriculum design for business

Design process issues

The model used here for curriculum development draws heavily on thinking from the business world, though set in the context of the purposes of HE, going beyond the business requirement for any project to demonstrate a positive lifetime net present value. It expands on ideas proposed by Toohey (1999) with more explicit consideration of matching the external requirements, at the levels of both content and values, with the internal ones of the university's mission and standards, as well as its capabilities. Toohey's two-stage process map emphasises the needs for explicit consideration of beliefs and values in education, both within

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the broad goals of the programme and in the more content-specific area of 'what should be taught'. Because of the limitations of the scope discussed above, the project will look only briefly at issues within specific modules, which make up the second stage of Toohey's model as well as much of the second stage of the approach outlined above. The process model also incorporates key elements of the model by Hartman and Warren (1994), who identified the need to consider curriculum operational issues, including any resource gaps and the approach to assessment and course coherence.

Assessment philosophy

The context of many business school projects lies in matching the market need for specific professional knowledge with the requirements of HE for an inquiry-led approach to the generation of knowledge. Ross (2000) developed a model of curriculum design providing three approaches:

- Academic/classical humanist, in which content is the driving force and learning is seen as an individual process
- Utilitarian/technocratic, where objectives lead curriculum development and consumer choice dominates
- Progressive/developmental, in which process dominate and interaction and student-teacher partnership play a central role

Business school projects often require blending a progressive-developmental approach with the classical-humanist approach. The latter is not, and never has been, as static as Ross's model suggests. Especially at a postgraduate level, taking a more 'academic' approach means more than teacher giving knowledge to students: the discovery of knowledge involves elements of interaction and participation, not mere recitation.

Drawing on work by Kemmis et al. (1983), Eisner (1994) and Posner (1995) with school curricula, Toohey (1999) identified five different philosophic approaches to curriculum design relevant for universities:

- Traditional, discipline-based
- Performance or systems-based
- Cognitive
- Personal relevance or experiential
- Socially critical

Toohey’s 'traditional' approach corresponds most directly with Ross's academic/classical-humanist approach; 'performance' shares the vocational element of Ross's utilitarian, objectives-driven approach; while 'personal relevance' most nearly matches the 'progressive' one in Ross’s approach. However, Toohey's cognitive approach contains useful lessons in the formulation of business school programmes as well, particularly for postgraduate courses. This approach is aimed at developing the ability to think, analyse and organise new experiences into framework. Quoting Posner (1995), she traces the roots of this approach to Kant, though he might have drawn as much on Plato’s concepts of forms. These philosophical roots are not without challenge (John Stuart Mill in the case of Kant; Aristotle famously in the case of Plato), but the degree to which business education is built around conceptual frameworks suggests this is an area that course development would do well not to ignore. In practical terms, the implications of Toohey's cognitive approach are that a programme needs less emphasis on breadth of content, and more on mastering concepts and developing critical reasoning. Assessment needs to allow the demonstration of complex understanding and problem-solving, and teaching should be focused on real-life examples. These have some parallels with the methods associated with Ross's progressive one, but someone developing a business school programme would do well to test the design against Toohey's methods as well.

Therefore, among the implications we can draw is that as a professional-style qualification, this programme would need an approach to assessment that tends to be criterion-referenced; with considerable opportunities for formative feedback; emphasising case studies drawn, where possible, from contemporary, real-life situations. This can be a difficult issue when the fiscal imperatives of the university require a modular approach, in particular drawing on modules developed for another programme, in effect reusing the elements of design for a different curriculum. Ensuring an appropriate fit of assessments can draw on a more general application of the thinking introduced with respect to group assessment design (Nordberg, 2007; forthcoming 2008). It involves a process through which programme leaders can review the assessment methodology module by module following a grid tracking the assessment methods, sources, purposes and timing, to ensure sufficient range and balance is achieved.

Following the approach suggested by Toohey (1999) and Ross (2000), teaching will need to be interactive and it is precisely here where issues of coherence may arise in modular course design, especially when, for fiscal reasons, it may not make business sense to develop many new modules when there remains capacity to include more students in existing teaching sessions.

An iterative approach

Universities require an iterative model of development, matching external requirements with internal imperatives, both academic and fiscal. This paper suggests an approach with three principal phases: one strategic, a second operational and tactical, and a third dealing with post-launch issues of evaluation and programme extensions.

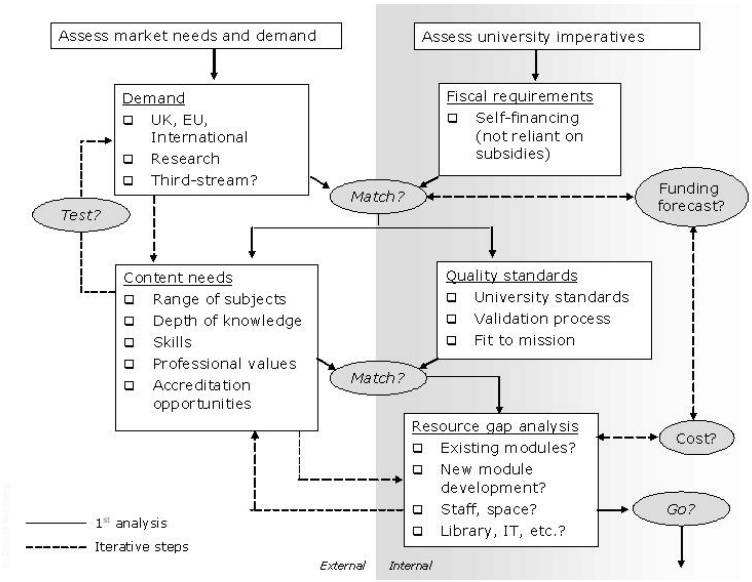

Figure 1: Strategic analysis

Figure 1 describes a strategic analysis of external requirements and internal capabilities to assess the feasibility of the project. The right side of the diagram deals with internal considerations. Universities throughout the UK face tight budgetary constraints, leaving little scope for speculative investment in course development. They cannot afford development that requires significant up-front spending, almost irrespective of the expected payback. New courses must be completely self-financing, if not in the first year then by the second. Some school deans even face demands from their universities for a renewal of the course portfolio with no increase in budget. In allocating its resources, universities prefer projects that show the capability of generating a surplus and attracting so-called third-stream income from activities such as consultancy or an externally funded research institute.

However, there is more to organising a university degree programme than a good business case: the content needs of potential students, their future employers and the professional bodies likely to inform their future career development. These content needs will be compared with the quality standards of the university, the university's mission and the validation requirements for HE. Not reflected in the diagram is the option to provide services as non-degree, unaccredited training programmes. Moreover, this area of inquiry must meet the university's standards and those of the HE sector. Having established a match between a university's imperatives and the content needs of potential students and other constituencies, the strategic component of the model involves a gap analysis of resources required for launch, against existing capabilities.

Having established the feasibility and suitability of the programme, the plan then involves taking the steps needed to make it operational. Figure 2 outlines a series of steps required internally and externally for launch.

The recruitment plan looks at how the programme can be marketed to potential students, drawing upon the professional bodies and potential employers whose interests the strategic plan sought to address, as well as the university's conventional marketing. A potentially important source of recruitment is other universities, which did not figure in the strategic plan. Their recent graduates, however, may be seeking a professionally oriented conversion degree, allowing them to take the critical reasoning they developed in a general undergraduate programme and convert it through application to more employment-relevant subject matter. In this way a history, language or pure mathematics graduate might seek courses in marketing or economics to make their skills more relevant to employers.

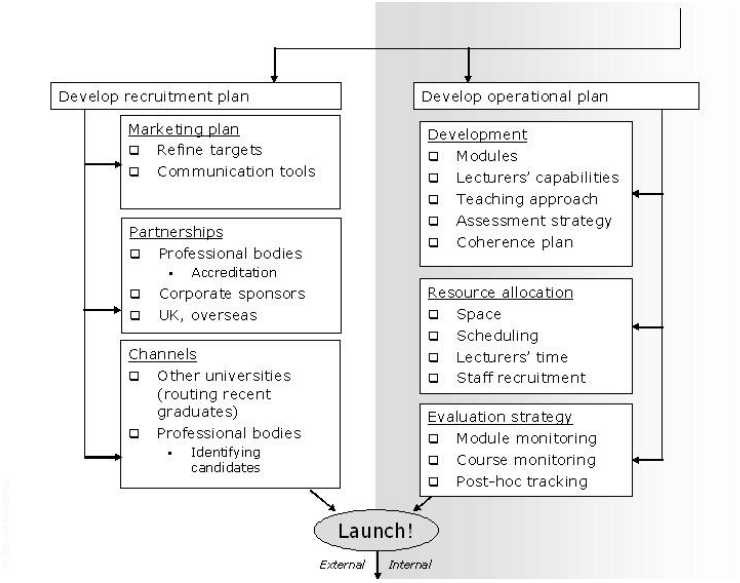

Figure 2: Tactical plan

The tactical plan also needs to consider operational issues – the gaps identified in the strategic plan. Of particular importance for this project are issues concerning the teaching approach, assessment strategy and a plan to ensure coherence within the modular structure of the university's method of delivery.

While any degree programme could be considered in isolation, the nature of a university is to expand the body of knowledge as well as transmit it to course participants. For that reason, the model elaborates on the strategic plan's thinking about opportunities for research and possible 'third-stream' income from consultancy or related interaction with the business world whose interests the programme aims to meet. At the same time, iterative enhancement of the degree programme requires execution of plan for evaluation developed in detail during the second stage. This institutional learning then feeds back into the design phase (Figure 3).

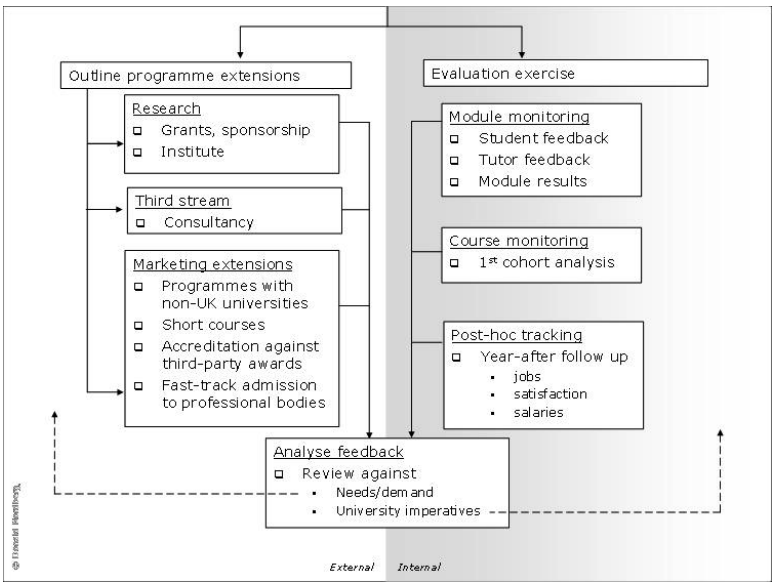

Figure 3: Extensions and evaluation

Course coherence

This model takes us through to the first evaluation of the programme with a feedback loop to revisions and

modifications. It emphasises the use of existing modules and other course components as a means of lowering the costs of course development and therefore the institution's risk in approaching new markets. The use of standard components comes, however, with another type of risk: a lack of coherence.

Knight (2001) outlines the hazards of a loss of coherence, especially in strongly process-driven curriculum development, such as the model presented here. While this looks on the surface to fit the category of the 'rational planning' approaches whose faults he elaborates, the iterative steps of checking curriculum design against external needs actually suggests a process akin to a developmental one. Drawing on Whittington's (2001) framework for categorising approaches to business strategy, curriculum design, too, can have single or multiple intended outcomes, and deliberate or emergent processes to get there. Ross's academic/classical-humanist approach (Ross, 2000), in its stereotyped manifestations, looks a lot like Knight's 'Rational Curriculum Planning', with its (what we see as) flawed assumption of a "determinate and linear universe" (Knight, 2001: 372). That is a universe akin to the one Whittington termed a Classical approach to business strategy and which much of current thinking in the strategy world has rejected as too narrow-minded on account of its expectation of a single-outcome, deliberate process.

Indeed, over 40 years ago Mintzberg (1967) wrote about the need for emergent strategies, creating a school of strategy that Whittington came to think of either as 'evolutionary' when aimed at a single goal, or as 'processual' when serving multiple outcomes simultaneously. Viewed in those terms, this model for curriculum design is distinctly 'processual'. The constituencies for the programme, and hence the desired outcomes, include potentially multiple outside authorities: employers in directly related of adjacent disciplines; professional bodies including potential sources of accreditation for the programme; as well as the academic interests of the university itself in transferring and building upon the body of knowledge of the subject area. The iterative nature of the suggested programme development reflects the emergent nature of the process. It aims to capture and respond to developments from students, both during and then sometime after their participation, as well as from other constituencies and the university and its academic staff.

While this interactive and responsive approach helped address the risks Ross associates with static and all-knowing academic/classical-humanist approach and Knight with rationally planned curricula, it still leaves any programme so developed open to the risk of an internal loss of coherence – both of the programme and for the students taking it.

Students joining the programme, especially in the early stages when cohort numbers are low, will find themselves in modules where the majority of students are taking very different courses, and where module tutors may well have sculpted the content to meet the expectations of the majority without consideration of a needs of the new students or the context of their studies. Comparatively few modules will have been designed specifically for this course. For example, in development of a new course on corporate communications, the market needs analysis suggested inclusion of a module on Global Investment Markets. The University already taught one called 'Global Financial Markets', but detailed analysis of the content of the existing module showed it was oriented towards financial markets of interest to a corporate treasurer, but underemphasised the need of the new course to develop understanding of the structure of global equity markets. Incorporating the existing module in the new course could have, therefore, proved a false economy. Knowing that (from the needs analysis) might lead one to take an expedient decision to launch programme with one module slightly askew to the purpose of the course with the intention of revisiting that course at the earliest opportunity, and engaging in further module development after the first cohort's experience.

The loss of coherence for students was identified by Perkins (2003) in a rather similar case. His solution involved building into the modular course structure a series of off-programme meetings that give students on the new programme a chance to meet as a group – with the programme leader – in cross-curricular seminars to create a "balance between pedagogical objectives and economisation of resources" (Perkins, 2003: 17). While a useful contribution, it is not clear where that would fit into existing university structures and given the competition for space and resources it looks, at least in early stages of any programme, like something that would come from the goodwill of the programme leader. The good news is that if the programme is successful in attracting a reasonably substantial number of students, further module development can begin to address any issues in coherence.

Conclusions

This process model for curriculum design deals with the specific issues that frequently arise in development of business subjects, where the canon of academic knowledge needs to be framed and developed for a specific set of commercial and professional imperatives of outside constituencies. Moreover, it suggests how this can be done in the context of the need for low-risk, low-investment approaches from the university. Few courses come with funding in place from a benefactor or with the certainty of success that eliminates the institution's risk.

However, the process is of more general application. Other subject areas need to be cognisant of the negative feedback loops coming from graduates who, if not in the immediate afterglow of graduation then a year or two later, become negative ambassadors for a course that did not meet their needs. Moreover, as the hunt for research funding from non-governmental sources and other third-stream income continues, this model offers a checklist to help universities explore the potential within its existing programmes as well as new ones, while fine-tuning delivery of teaching and the facilitation of learning.

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