



Academics' curriculum development practices at UCL: a preliminary study for the Imaginative Curriculum project

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Introduction

This report forms one strand of work undertaken as background to the Imaginative Curriculum project, commissioned by the Generic Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). It covers the initial scoping work undertaken at one of the partner sites: University College London (UCL). The purpose of this work was to provide a foundation for the creation of a network and the development of a web site intended to support academics' curriculum development work within Higher Education. As such, this report takes as given the literature review undertaken for the project; this wider research context is thus not addressed here.

After briefly outlining the methodology, the main findings of this study are presented. The report concludes by considering some of the issues that these findings pose for the project, and by suggesting further work which it would be valuable to undertake in this area.

Methodology

The study involved a series of 10 interviews, following the schedule provided by the central team. In addition, all respondents completed a table of suggested approaches to learning about teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum.

The request to sample a range of levels of experience was met as follows:

Category	Departments
4 experienced HE teachers (course tutors)	SLAIS, French, Dutch, Bartlett
3 less experienced academic teachers	Bartlett, SLAIS, Dentistry
2 new academic teachers	Electrical Engineering, Law
1 central support person	Education & Professional Development

This sample provided a good spread of participation from across the college, representing the Faculty of Arts & Humanities most strongly, but also covering the Faculties of Engineering, Laws and the Built Environment, as well as a merged institution that forms part of the medical school.

All interviews were fully transcribed before analysis.

It is important to note that the sampling frame did not hold in practice; the assumption that experience and responsibility were linked proved to be an over-simplification, status linked to research rather than teaching experience. Thus there were examples within this study of staff with limited experience being asked to develop new courses, and of those with experience and teaching qualifications 'inheriting' courses.

Ways of learning about teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum

One item in the interview consisted of a table of items, which participants were asked to rate in terms of their importance as a way of learning about teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum (TLAC). Ratings were requested on a three-point scale. The results of this question are summarised in Table 1.

Examples of ways of gaining information / learning about TLAC	Range	Median	Mode
Through teaching / experimenting	2-3	3	3
Through designing a course/module	2-3	3	3
Observing others teaching	1-2	2	2
Reading textbooks or papers on teaching	1-3	2	1
Reading policy and course documents	1-2	1	1
Web-based information (what types of info)	1-3	2	1.5
Formal training	1-3	2	2
Participation in institutional staff development events	1-3	2	2
Participation in departmental development events	1-3	2	2.5
Participation in subject-based conferences/workshops	1-3	2	2.5
Course team /departmental meetings	1-3	2	2
Conversations in the bar, at the photocopier, over lunch etc	1-3	2	1
Involvement in working groups / projects	1-3	3	3
Producing course / module guides	1-3	1.5	1
Involvement in networks	1-3	2	2
Gaining feedback from students	2-3	3	3
Gaining feedback from colleagues	1-3	2	2
Engaging in a process like QAA review or course review	1-2	2	2
Other: Secondment work with EPD (1 response)	3	3	3

Table 1: A summary of participants' ratings of the importance of different ways of learning about teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum (TLAC)

This table broadly supports the issues identified from the qualitative data: that staff learn through active engagement in the processes of curriculum development, place a strong emphasis on feedback from students and on their disciplinary context, are somewhat antipathetic towards 'formal' educational training and writing, and do not particularly value processes (e.g. writing guides, QAA reviews) which they perceive as primarily administrative.

Awareness of the LTSN

Of those interviewed, only the staff developer and two academics knew about the LTSN. A third, however, responded positively when the network was described ("Come to think of it maybe I have!"), but it was not altogether clear from his discussion that this affirmation was accurate.

The familiarity of the first academic arose from two sources. Firstly, they were directed to their subject centre by a senior member of staff:

Well, I didn't know a lot about them, other than that I was invited to go to a meeting on the curriculum, on curriculum, when our departmental rep couldn't go. [...] And that, ironically, they are giving a talk here tomorrow lunchtime that we've been told all teaching staff should go to. [laughs]

Secondly, their awareness was raised by the possibility of securing funding from the centre.

Well I think that they - they give guidance, and sometimes give seminars on aspects of teaching. Curriculum's been mentioned. And I think that sometimes they'll have money for projects relating to teaching and learning.

The other academic explained that her awareness arose from her general approach to information management, and from personal contact.

I wouldn't say I work with them closely, it's just my normal method of finding out about what's going on is to be on a lot of e-mail lists. And so I did get e-mail from them when they started. But I did know about the LTSN generally because a friend of mine at a similar university was involved.

No ways of redressing this situation were suggested during the study. This low level of awareness poses potential problems for this project and the web site that it might develop, as identified by the staff developer in the sample.

Knowing that it existed, because they wouldn't know it existed, and so wouldn't know to look there. That's quite a fundamental one really.

Formal training vs. informal networks

Discussion of formal training revealed a range of attitudes amongst staff. Some actively sought such opportunities in order to address what they saw as shortcomings in their expertise:

I took a career break, and I felt that I was quite green when I came back to it. So I started by going to the 'tips for teachers' course up at [specifies location]. And then I also went on a few meetings on competency.

Established staff seemed to be less keen on the idea of formal training, preferring instead to focus on the opportunities for debate that such courses provided.

I think formal training at this stage isn't all that important if it is a question of you know somebody coming in to train me as it were. On the other hand if it was in the form of a debate on different types of experience and indeed debate across

different disciplines that would help too. But as I said I think a simple training course is a bit wide of the mark.

Indeed, one academic spoke well of the formal courses that were offered, but still preferred to talk with the people who offered them.

[How do you go about learning about teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum?] Me personally, probably through you people in [EPD] because I think there's quite a lot of expertise in that already - but I've got to know people at HERDU.

This emphasis on the social element of learning also featured in discussions of how course teams operated.

We have team meeting at which we can discuss, what. And you know I could, if I felt - in fact I have done - if I want to seek advice I would seek it from that lot, and say, well, "did this tutorial work for you", and "how was it?" and "could we think about not doing this next year?"

Most of the participants in this study attributed considerable importance to the discussions they had with peers who they already knew to be knowledgeable about a particular topic.

I acquire it normally informally to start of with, by talking to colleagues about ideas, or people who I know are already interested in the area, or working in education. And they will pass on leads.

I look at other people's reading lists, if they have web sites at other universities, I talk, you know, we sort of talk with them on a mailing list, anecdotally, I don't think of it as a formal process, but no doubt it emerges from, you know, jokes and stories and chats that I have with colleagues, what they think works and what doesn't.

In spite of these reservations, however, it is important to note that formal training does represent one systematic way of reaching large numbers of academics, and that as such it may form a valuable focus for this project.

It's mandatory for probationary lecturers who haven't undertaken three years... who don't have three years of teaching experience and haven't undertaken a similar course elsewhere. For anyone else it's optional, they can come on a drop-in basis. I don't know what kind of numbers come along on a drop-in basis to the course design elements.

The influence of context

It became clear from an early stage that the process of learning about curriculum design was strongly influenced by individuals' contexts. This was apparent at three levels: in terms of personal history, the departmental context, and the wider disciplinary context.

Personal histories

The personal element manifested itself through accumulated experience, as discussed elsewhere in this report. One important part of this process was exposure to practices that the individual later sought to emulate or adapt.

I've been very fortunate, and I've had... there's an annual review of one of the courses I've been involved in teaching previously, and an incredibly thoughtful course leader, wrote a very critical, insightful, scholarly review of the course. So having read that, that's where my experience - that's part of the experience and expertise that you bring to bear on the new course.

It was also clear, however, that personal inhibitions limited opportunities for learning in this way.

I think a lot of these actually are very useful and very important, I just haven't done enough of them being a new lecturer. One thing that I would love to do is observe colleagues lecturing more and it is silly because I am embarrassed to say "do you mind if I sit in on your lecture?"

The departmental context

There were also clear indications that the departmental cultures, and the values they espouse, shaped individuals' practices.

Well first we try to define a kind of general direction for the whole department.

As a principle, the course team was committed to peer learning as a major element of our course, and that does mean that you have to design the course in a certain way to allow that to happen.

In some cases, this process was described as being active and explicit, suggesting an open and enquiring approach to directing departmental culture.

We have had days, just a half day for example, well a whole day on one occasion, to bring everybody in the department together and just think about the curriculum and bring in somebody from outside, EPD for example, to help us collect our thoughts. So we spend time on that.

In others, changes were required as senior members of the department positioned the group in relation to external pressures.

With the formal ones that were for the TAE [Teaching Assessment Exercise] it was very much centrally driven from the department. And we're a big department, and it came from on high there, and we had regular monthly meetings for that exercise.

Elsewhere, these processes were recognisable on reflection, but hidden in day-to-day practice.

Mainly I'm just sort of fitting in to practices that already exist. Apart from how sort of within one seminar, how I choose to sort of, erm, or what I choose to teach - which is pretty much up to me - I'm teaching within a structure that I don't really control.

The department also forms a context for 'learning through doing', which suggests that there may be a form of cognitive apprenticeship taking place which inducts individuals into departmental cultures and practices.

Well I mean they take, at the moment they take the form of doing it, of actually sitting down and reviewing courses regularly and if necessary designing new ones. So departmental 'activity' would be very important. I think we would all be at that sort of coal face of it you know that is were we actually get the job done - as a result of that departmental activity and so on.

The disciplinary context

There were also discussions of disciplinary context, the range of which varied. In some cases, this was discussed in terms of comparable departments within the institution; in others, reference was made to other institutions, and importantly to professional bodies, with which the participant had established links.

Seeking advice from other departments, other forums for debate within [the broad discipline], of which there are quite a few now. So that is where I would start and that's where there is in relevant aspects of our curriculum we might look to particular other institutions as well, such as those particularly interested in [discipline] teaching, or the technology of [discipline] teaching, or we might you know look elsewhere for tips on content courses. So you know outside the institution you would look at particular other institutions for further advice.

I get advice from colleagues, and you know, discuss with colleagues who have tried out various things, and who are in the field, about what they might do - both here and elsewhere in my subject.

On the one hand, this was interpreted as a cause of change, and a driver for curriculum re-development.

There's been a lot in medicine on evidence-based learning. There's been a lot through NICE - the National Institute for Clinical Excellence - on changing clinical procedures, if you like, and wisdom tooth third molars we used to take out simply because they exist; there're now rigid guidelines, so that's affected the teaching a lot.

The fashion at the moment is definitely [a topic], even after the big slump in the market last year. All the students want to do [this topic], often not really knowing what '[this topic]' is, because [it] is a huge topic, it goes from [foundations] right through to [applications] and even management. So yes there are fashionable areas, and that is definitely fashionable. My area is distinctly unfashionable at the moment which is a bit of a pain.

On the other, it was also described as giving stability and continuity to courses.

We are not so much trend-led, as that it is a process that the courses change over the years according to the research interests of the teachers. So if they pick up on certain trends that might have an impact, but the course, if you had done the course

10 years ago and you were to come back today it would not look dramatically different in terms of course material and overall direction.

The influence of professional bodies also had a part to play in this process, although the extent of their influence seemed questionable.

The [relevant professional body] sends around an accreditation panel once every 3 or 4 years and in fact they are coming in March or April of this year. They don't...they really just look at the syllabuses of our courses and make sure, I think that they make sure that we are teaching certain key things, such as...I am not certain about this, I would need to check it up, I think that they check that we are teaching you know, [this list of key topics]. Probably not much more than that really, very general things. They also look at other more broader things. They check to see that we are giving the students [disciplinary] application skills. [...] And it is only really the syllabuses and those more general things that the [professional body] lays down in our courses and to be honest with you, certainly the more general things, we tend to look at retrospectively. You know we don't design the courses [with those things in mind]. It's more "Oh the [professional body] accreditation panel are coming what have we got to satisfy [part 1] and [part 2]?"

However, as with factions within the academic discipline, their main involvement appeared to be about preserving a particular image of what students 'ought' to study.

I think that they're political [...] in the sense of what people believe these students need to know.

Still wider, beyond the boundaries of specific disciplines and professions, were governmental policies that introduced particular developments.

You forgot key skills by the way! The word just popped into my head. [...]In that when we review courses, that never used to be the case, but when we review courses now key skills are always part of it. [...] In the department we have taken key skills fairly seriously, more so than most departments. To us they are quite useful a useful tool. We have agreed on a grid of different types of skills. And we have also done one of these afternoons where we have set aside time for thinking about this and tried to mesh the key skills with what we already have and we can build progress into that as well. And so nowadays when we review courses, that key skills element is always part of the picture.

In general, participation in the wider context of disciplinary and professional work was seen as vital to keeping the curriculum up-to-date:

Especially in my area where it is such a diverse area and everything changes so rapidly that I can't keep up with reading myself so I do get a lot of feedback from things like networks.

Recognising the existing expertise of staff

Through the course of the interviews, it became clear that staff were already well informed about teaching and learning issues. In part, this is a consequence of the tacit process of induction into practice that seem to take place within departments. It also reflects their

awareness of the wider context within which they work - an awareness gained as a result of the fact that they *have already* worked in this context.

Once I have come around to producing the course or module guide I do it in the knowledge that I have acquired through these other things.

I think in everything that I planned to do I was drawing externally. But that was my previous knowledge and experience.

As a result they are already able to undertake curriculum development activities successfully, which gives them a sense of security in their practice.

I think if people are very experienced, they're probably re-designing a course or designing a course based on a great deal of experience, and probably doing something that's very very good - not informed by theories or models, but because they're intelligent analytical people with a great deal of experience. It is - they've kind of derived from first principles what these people are writing about. So they won't be looking for anything, and won't need anything.

Interestingly, however, there were also cases where such personal experience made it clear that staff would be unable to solve particular problems - and it is in situations such as this where staff may choose to seek other advice and guidance.

I can tell when a lecture is going really badly because the students are quite disruptive. I am lecturing a class of 90 and I think that is just over the critical mass where students stop being polite if you are not doing very well. So for every single session which went badly I knew that I was going to have problems because it was highly mathematical and I think that that was where the problem lies, I was just losing the students we had. So the mental processes are quite obvious, you know. I know what the problem is. Actually how to get around that problem is quite difficult, because what I remember from when I was a student, the lecture courses that I enjoyed, were those that had no technical content, but the lecture courses that were good for passing exams were those that have a high technical content. So there is a balance to be found somewhere there!

It is also important to recognise the limits on such expertise. Since this kind of awareness reflects individual career trajectories, it cannot provide access to a 'general' or universal awareness of issues.

For teaching I would say it's probably a bit more local than that. Sort of, erm, people whom I encountered during the course of my doctorate, and afterwards, so that tends to mean that they're Oxford and London oriented.

One interesting element in this discussion was that even when departments work to consolidate their practices, personal histories gave individuals within departments distinctive perspectives that enabled them to anticipate and plan for problems that colleagues with different histories might not be aware of.

It sounds quite arrogant, really - I didn't feel I needed to draw on outside things because obviously it was an emergency, I could see there were really quite predictable problems that were likely to surface very, very soon, and I had taught

on two pioneering but quite different excellent courses of this kind, but I'd also read the course kind of documentation from a wider variety, so I felt really very familiar with the type of course and type of issues at different institutions already. So I felt I knew that. I knew... and in fact, I did know that I knew the kind of things that happened on these kind of courses, and the things that were going to be a problem. It was just that the people who had designed it had never done one before and hadn't anticipated... and that was what that course review about. I was anticipating things that they hadn't anticipated.

This form of experience has clear implications for the project, highlighting that a 'deficit' model of academics' needs is likely to be inaccurate and over-simplistic. Instead, it will be necessary to consider how individual histories and variations in knowledge can be supported - this poses a significant challenge for the design of the proposed web site.

Curriculum re-development

Although the project's initial focus was on curriculum development, this was rarely discussed by participants. Instead, their focus was on curriculum *re*-development. Even where major changes had been implemented, these involved re-working rather than starting again from scratch.

We're in the middle of a major overhaul at the moment but it's largely a restructuring with existing context to give more sort of parity across the modules in terms of the weighting, and to make them more modular. So they leave you to some extent getting the content up to date, but the primary reason for it is really to rationalise teaching, organise the timetable, and provide more opportunities for students to take different options.

In many cases, their focus arose from particular problems that occurred when running existing courses.

I think our problems with the students - we have postgraduate students, almost all from overseas, and there has always been a problem that they always want to do a lot of hands-on operation and they want... more major stuff than there is to go around with the trainees, and often they want to do more major stuff than they're capable of, without necessarily knowing the basics first.

The most frequently discussed reasons for considering curriculum re-design concerned the characteristics of students.

One of the things we have been looking at is a way to somehow tie the course materials back to the students' own experience so that they don't feel so isolated and the other aspect of that is that we have an almost 100% overseas student intake so their cultural experiences are very different. So that is something we have to be aware of.

We also really saw a need to make all of the programmes modular and that's largely a marketing of attracting students this year, whether it's becoming more or difficult for people to do these courses full time or over a year. We're in a wonderful position being in central London to get people doing part time study on modular courses and we need to make it possible for them to do that. And I think it will

produce a package which is a lot more attractive to students and also people who are wanting to do CPD.

These could give rise to quite fundamental issues for courses, such as the teaching and learning techniques that could be employed.

There were like flexibility issues, like scheduling the course which people are taking part time, that was quite a big issue. The possibility of peer support, which we felt can be a key thing but which we weren't fully utilising because the cohort wasn't developing because of the ad hoc nature of the taught sessions.

They also influenced the inclusion and organisation of content.

We take into account where the students come from. In our case of course the major restricting factor is that [this language] is not taught at A-level. So we have to cater for students who come and start learning the language from scratch. What that means fundamentally is that it is the language acquisition which is the kind of central pillar and has to be for the whole curriculum. The curriculum is built simply around that given that you start from that students come without a single word of [this language] when they begin and that dictates as it were that everything has to be co-ordinated with the progress in language acquisition.

Levels of review

The process of reviewing programmes was explicitly covered in the interview schedule. However, what came across strongly from the interviews was that formal review represents only one of three levels at which academics consider their courses.

Micro-level reviews

The first of these levels concerned what might be called micro-level adjustments to the course. Many of these were prompted by sensitivity to students' needs.

The students we have do often vary quite a lot in their ability and in their previous experience. It often makes a difference to what each individual student's needs are. So from year to year we might have a different bunch who want different things out of us. So that guides us. I think we do try to be flexible, so that they get what they want and what they need out of us.

Some things can be of course tweaked week to week.

Others, however, arose as a result of particular opportunities that occurred in teaching.

Well I mainly do hands-on surgical teaching, because that I think is much more difficult to review the actual teaching, other than keeping up to date with developments in the literature. Because you tend to teach on whatever surgical cases you've got, and make the most of the opportunities there.

Macro-level reviews

Few examples were given of widespread changes to courses, other than those already discussed in the section on curriculum re-development. However, several forms of periodic review were discussed which allowed programmes to be re-focused.

However, these formal processes were not particularly valued in and of themselves; indeed, the requirements they imposed were undesired by several of the participants.

As far as I am aware it has to go up through various College committees, approved through external examiners, visiting, erm, accreditation bodies departmental teaching committee, faculty, College. So you know I am aware there is a formal structure. Thankfully someone else has to deal with all of that!

Oooh, don't mention the QAA to me!

However, it was recognised that these requirements were necessary, and even useful.

I am sure it is the same across UCL, which is that we have got to sign up basically to a contract which is a form called a GPC [Graduate Programme Component] form in which you say what the objectives are, what the coursework is going to be, what the learning outcomes are going to be. So in actual fact if I was to want to try to make a revolutionary change it would be quite a slow process. I would have to first get the approval of my colleagues on the course and then put it in front of the graduate school committee, which I am going to be doing by the way with that opt-in module in a couple of months time, but I wouldn't do that quickly because it is a slow and bureaucratic process. But that is for good reason!

It is important to meet targets but I think a lot of us sort of think of that as the minimum rather than what we are actually trying to achieve.

Meso-level reviews

It was at the meso-level that the participants' attention seemed focused. This level involved the year-on-year re-development of materials and changes of emphasis that did not involve re-working the formal descriptions of the course. As echoed elsewhere in this report, many of these changes arose as a result of academics' perceptions of students' experiences.

I have done a lot of internal reflection where I would say after lectures I have thought that lecture went really badly, I could tell that the students weren't understanding a thing that I was saying, and I have made my own notes. So I would teach that differently next year if I had to do that course myself again.

Others were seen as part of the process of keeping the course up-to-date.

I don't see the course and its content as being static. I think I need to understand what you mean by review. Because I would think that part of the normal process of updating the course material would take on board developments which are subject-specific in terms of research. That would happen automatically; I wouldn't expect an instructor to come in year on year and deliver the same material, because they'd be out of the door.

Generally, this was seen as being the most useful level to focus upon in terms of making beneficial changes.

The regular review period I think comes so infrequently that you'd have missed the chance to improve more frequent, low... you know - what I think, is... stress people out incredibly, is these big cycles of review, when actually if they were more frequent and less intense, there would be this loop, a closed loop. You would build that into the review, the process, and it would be just part of the teaching.

Links between the levels

Importantly, however, participants did not draw a fixed division between these levels. They felt that the small adaptations of teaching led to in-course developments, and that these in turn were consolidated through the less regular formal review processes.

there's the IQA [Internal Quality Audit], the new IQA, but that's not really the same... well, if you're sensible, you'll have indicated things, so you'll do a course review and present that as what you've done to the full IQA, so the kind of quality auditing becomes quality auditing of the course review process, and that would be fitting and appropriate and maybe [indistinct] will be fine and dandy.

I think that for the formal review processes we did a lot of review for the TAE [Teaching Assessment Exercise]. We've got a lot of things - perhaps things that were happening informally - on a more formal basis. Programme committees sort of met at a more rigid - a more, oh, what's the word - they had to meet so many times a year whereas they were ad hoc meetings before, and everything was documented more, more thoroughly. And assessment of the students happened on a more regular basis, and things like that.

Finally, it is also worth highlighting that participants drew a clear distinction between course review and course re-development.

I have reviewed it to a certain degree. I have reviewed my module to a certain degree and I have also reviewed the course overall. Some of it was more of a passive review in that I wanted to take a back seat and look at how it was running and not for me to jump in there and start changing things.

When we redesign courses or when we review a course? Because the outcome of review of course may be that you keep things the same.

Student Feedback

As has been noted elsewhere in this report, many of the changes made to courses were instigated because of staff perceptions of students' experiences. Because of the central importance of this, techniques for gaining feedback from students were discussed repeatedly.

Course questionnaires

One ubiquitous approach to gathering feedback was the end of course questionnaire. Several participants identified changes that had been instigated in response to such an exercise.

[The department] overall has a standard questionnaire which goes out at the end of every term and we review that in quite an active way and see... For example last year the strongest comments were to do with the provision of computers because we are quite heavily demanding in terms of coursework and the students found it quite problematic that we don't have a good computer suite. We took that on board and this year and actually bought computers and they have been lent out to students for the year because we don't have the space.

However, several shortcomings of the current process of using questionnaires were identified.

I think the questionnaires are sort of too little, too late. They're fed up by this time in the year, it's way after - we review, the students have got a three part course. The three parts are quite distinct but we don't do the course questionnaires until right at the end. They hardly remember the dim days of mid-November or whatever. And there isn't much to write, and their exams are coming up. So yes I don't think they're, you know. It's the right kind of process, it's anonymous, they know they don't return it to me. But other factors mean that I don't think they're likely to be that sort of - voluble on it.

Additionally, staff remained cautious about taking this exercise at face value.

At some times it is extremely important. At various stages in the process it is extremely important like at the beginning and the end. I don't think we should be led by student feedback but it is a very important part in our deliberation.

To illustrate this, one participant described a situation in which responding to such requests actually caused problems for the course.

I felt that I maybe over-responded to some student requests to be more directive and to give them more information, so I did begin teaching this year with more - like in the undergraduate subject, [...], that I teach there's not a lecture/tutorial format, it's purely seminars, so the seminars both have to deliver information and get them to discuss it. And they were sort of, "please, you talk for the first hour, and then we'll have a little chat." I didn't do that. But I did talk for the first sort of 20 minutes, and I also tried to sum up and give them a mini lecturer spiel half-way through I thought that they needed this, although I sort of regret this in fact I think I overdid it. Because I think they got - it got - too safe, and I had the feeling that one group in particular that I had were quite weak as a group, and were probably weaker on average than any of the groups that I had taught so far. The other people it didn't matter so much because they could sort of burst out of the constraints. This group didn't, and I felt that they just got more and more silent apart from about two or three individuals who did pipe up. They were therefore - they very nice and they were very easy to teach, but it was because it was too simple and they were just taking notes, so I felt maybe I could... the balance is hard to get.

Alternatives to the course questionnaire

Some participants were directly critical of the feedback questionnaires, favouring alternative ways of eliciting feedback.

I think that probably it's not that useful. While they're doing it, the marks are always fairly high. But the end of year assessment, where they meet an independent - what would you call him... they meet someone who's independent and do a questionnaire, and since they've more or less finished at that point I think that's probably more frank.

Indeed, several participants suggested alternative approaches which they believed to be more effective in this regard.

They actually did the course to find out what was wrong with it, and well as it happens that was very clear. But it's very - it gives you the information from the students' perspective, but with your knowledge in a way which asking students just can't entirely give you. So it's a really useful thing to do, actually. Very labour intensive!

The sort of review we had with students is that last year at the end of the summer we sort of collected together the students who were still around and just had a round table discussion and just asked them, "what would you like to say to next years' intake, what would you do to make their lives better?", and they said "actually we found it very stimulating but we would like more homework!" [laughs] and I am not quite sure whether that is over-enthusiasm but other comments that they made such as having stronger links with PhDs who are associated with the course were in the feedback and that is something that we have tried to adopt. So to have PhDs lecturing, showing how they do a piece of research and somehow because they are closer to them, not so much in age, but as in research experience it is very helpful to the students to have that and that is the sort of addition which it is possible to make without having to go through a formal process.

However, when considering informal discussions with students, it is important to keep in mind the political context in which such exchanges take place.

I try to chat to them about how they found the course and what they liked about it and should we change anything, but I try and slide it in to something else. So hopefully they'd be a bit more willing to let something slip. [laughs] [Do you think they're quite cagey about what they tell you?] Yeah. Enormously. [Can you give me an example, or expand on that?] [...] When I speak to them sort of casually one-on-one, I think they don't like to be as honest as they could be. There are all sorts of things that get in the way. If they say good things [laughs] I interpret them as honest, because I think that on the whole they don't have that much to gain. But maybe they do sometimes. So. Usually, I feel I have quite a good rapport with the students here, maybe being a bit younger than some of my colleagues it's better than with some of the other people, and they like that, and they don't want to upset you. I really think that's true. They don't want to say anything too mean. I don't know. They know that there are expectations on them as [our] students to be good students and to be keen and to do it and to like it, and I think very few of them are that willing to come out and say no they absolutely hated this and they thought it was a waste of time, or something. [...] They're within a set of relationships within which they're expected to be something. And I think that drives, you know, how they act, to a certain extent. I don't know how - you can only do it at the margins. You can get them to sort of say

small things, perhaps. I don't know. But my feeling is that I could get more honest feedback from them, but I don't.

Thus all three forms of feedback identified here (questionnaires, direct experience and informal discussion) appear to be problematic. Given the importance of the students' perspective for curriculum re-development, finding an effective way of gathering students' feedback appears to be a key issue to address.

Inherited courses

One issue that recurred throughout the interviews concerned the experience of staff who had been asked to take on a course that has been designed by others.

As a new lecturer the major factor is the syllabus that I am given. After the first year, after doing the course, there are changes that I would like to make because there are things in the course that from my own experience of [working in this area], that I think are irrelevant, at least these days. So were I to redesign the course myself, from the DTC [Departmental Teaching Committee] there would come an edict, and I would massage that myself. I did do that with the first year course. I did drop a couple of topics I felt were just pointless to teach students because you know they were techniques that just aren't used these days.

Such a situation was identified as a cause for re-development.

I have taken on as I said this module and I have been given a whole sequence of lectures that I will supposedly be repeating myself in the place of someone else last year. And I find that impossible to do. [...] I tried with one, this was right at the beginning of the year. It was very difficult. I got caught on the hop by the students asking me questions which I couldn't answer and I won't do that again.

So that is a sort of review I suppose, to actually take someone else's course and re-do it, but it is hard work. If I was lecturing on the entire module that would be 20-odd lectures. It is a huge amount of work. So I am prepared to somehow rather than take on someone else's lecture, a lecture here, a lecture there, is to actually devise my own new sequence of lectures.

In order to deal with this situations, some academics are forced fall back on their personal experiences of learning the subject.

The [subject] course was really, really hard work actually. [...] the notes that he had produced were really quite confusing I thought, and were pitched at a level that was far far far too high for the students given what they come into university knowing from A-levels these days. The handout was hand-written, not very clear, and there were no overheads or anything like that. So I essentially started that course again from scratch. I used the syllabus as a sort of outline and the sources I drew on there were actually my old undergraduate notes, my favourite textbooks in the area, because the subject is a favourite of mine and I have the knowledge to do that. So I produced a new lecture handout and overheads for use in the lecture course.

This represents a real problem for many academics, and is one area that the imaginative curriculum project could attempt to support.

There are a large number of people who actually teach courses, or who are responsible for and co-ordinate courses, that they have not had a part in designing, and which they grumble about but don't know how they could go about changing them. Because I know colleagues that have inherited courses designed by others, other people have retired, they are caught in a treadmill where they are delivering the course, they are tweaking it, but they haven't got the time or resources, because they cannot stop running the course because the department depends on the course running - they can't stop running the course in order to re-design it. But how do you refresh a course then?

What should the web site cover?

A range of suggestions were made about the kinds of content it would be desirable to include in an LTSN web site. Throughout these, there was a clear tension between 'generic' and disciplinary materials.

Generic resources

Generic advice on teaching and learning techniques was requested.

And also there's book I read something like '57 interesting things to do in your lectures' and that was quite good fun. You know it was suggesting little group activities that you could do and I have tried to do a few group activities in lectures and some were far more successful than others and again it would be nice to have a website which says these are the ones which are successful. You know, which you can actually do in a class of 90 and it won't decay into complete anarchy, so that sort of thing would be quite useful yes.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the best way to organise and access these would involve an online database.

The thing that I find most useful is where you've got a little block that shows you key in key words, and search. A searchable database. Absolutely. Because I would normally go, "case studies", "teaching large groups".

Additionally, the staff developer felt that participants in the probationary lecturers' programme...

[...] should be aware of one or a kind of curriculum design model. And actually I think curriculum design's one of the things that's most important [indistinct]. But the thing I would say is that [sigh] well, with learning outcomes and things so dominant at the moment, a model that takes a learning outcomes and uses them to design a curriculum. But I find Biggs constructive alignment model of getting your assessment, your teaching activities and your outcomes aligned - I find that... if people said to me, I'm going to read one thing, and I'm designing this course from scratch, I would say read that one thing before you think about designing your course from scratch. [...] But some model - you need to have some model or manual on course design.

Finally, one participant also suggested that "maybe something pretty basic on what you would call project management" would be useful.

Disciplinary resources

However, most participants found little to say about general resources, being more interested in discipline-specific examples and materials.

I find it very difficult to think about in general terms. Maybe if I try to bring out things for [my area] that might be somewhat easier...

Even some suggestions, which initially appear to be generic, actual focus on topic-specific concerns.

More generally, it would be nice to know what is good practice in lectures, erm, because there are a huge range of lecture styles and I am still not convinced what is best. I mean some lecturers give out no notes at all and write everything down on the OHP or whiteboard. I mean when I was a student I thought that that was a good way of lecturing because it forces you to write and the lecturer actually writing it all down forces him to slow down, so especially with it being mathematics they are not going to go too fast, you get plenty of time to absorb the steps of the algebra, and that seems to be completely out of favour these days, especially in science subjects because it is all handouts.

I would like advice on how to design a course from a syllabus. I really didn't know, when I was re-hashing this first year [topic] course, I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. I didn't know if I was putting the right material in. I didn't really know if I was pitching it at the right level, I knew that the previous lecturer had pitched it far too high. I certainly didn't know what students at A-level really knew. I didn't know you now what was taught in [subject] for instance. I guess I could have found that out but it would have involved a lot of web-searching around various exam board websites and all these things are very time-consuming. A student with a B in [subject] should know blah, blah, blah and that would be great for when you are designing 1st year courses.

One reason for this focus appears to be the way the disciplines (or more accurately, sub-disciplines or even particular communities of academics) construct knowledge has an influence on how the curriculum is structured. This posed particular problems for academics who saw themselves as working outside the main tradition of the discipline.

The major thing [the students] find difficult, apart from the general resistance to a philosophical subject, is their unease about their not being any right answers in it, and their unease about the structure of their learning being different in subjects. [This discipline more widely] - you know, it comes with principles, [...] with cases that package it a way that, you know - background, principle, case, background, principle, case. And you just can't do this in a philosophical subject.

In spite of the fact that this was an recurrent area for discussion, the interviewees felt that they were already sufficiently aware of disciplinary sources of information.

So I think there's a lot of trends in medicine, on... medicine's changing the way that clinicians behave, and that's become a lot more formalised, so that's interesting for teaching. So it's just a question of keeping up to date with that, but there's a lot of it about in the literature. It's not hard to do.

What was required, however, were new forms of comparison or new kinds of resource that had previously been ignored as being marginal. For example, one particular interest, shared by several participants, involved comparisons between courses.

If there are different examples from different universities, or people have thought in general about - well, you know traditional lecture, tutorial, seminar structures, or different structures are a better way of doing things, I don't know, or what the students do, what you do. So I suppose an array of examples of the different ways in which people thought it was viable to teach this subject, possibly drawn from people who actually do teach it, that might be quite helpful just to generate things you maybe didn't think about before.

However, it was emphasised that such a process was time-intensive and complex.

We never used to but it happens nowadays, yes in fact as part also of what I have just told you about the discussion since we started to collaborate with other departments elsewhere. One of the first things we did was to tabulate the various courses which already existed in the different places and so we now have two lots of the same, this course that we have is comparable in this and that respect with what they do in terms of the course descriptions. [...] It's actually fiendishly difficult to do as it turns out, even though there are only 4 quite small programmes involved. They have all developed historically of course in their own way without reference to anybody else, within their own context and so the entry requirements, the aims, the level and all that kind of thing it is completely different of course. So it is not easy to compare.

The main issue, then, appears not to be one of information provision, but of analysis that will enable this information to be used in new ways by staff.

Replication of existing services

Even where clear requests were made for discipline-specific resources, it is questionable whether or not these should be provided by this project. For example, there was some suggestion that simply being able to access examples of other peoples' teaching materials might be of benefit.

I would like to be told these are the things that all first year [subject] students ought to be taught. You know these are the core areas. I think that would be quite useful and I would like to see useful resources there. Where to go to get the information to put courses together. What are the good books and things. Going one step further it would be fabulous to have things like outlines and notes and things like that, but that is probably removing the intellectual free spirit of the academic a bit too much perhaps but I am all for cutting workload!

However, considerable work in this direction has already been undertaken as part of projects funded by the JISC, as part of their Distributed Network of Electronic Resources (DNER) programme.

What might be helpful I suppose is a good portal for doing literature searches. We have, supposedly we have, a good one here at UCL but I find it a bit cumbersome. And also maybe something that has to do with giving information about conferences and the like in our field. So I would describe our field as [specifies topic]. Some sort of portal that was to give information about where these conferences were to take place. To be aware of who is doing what, maybe also looking at other parallel courses because that is something that is quite difficult to find. Who is doing similar research to ourselves? When I say research I mean teaching and research to tie them together.

Replicating or even just linking to such resources was seen as a missed opportunity:

Yes, it could do that, and that would be really... boring. [laughs] I think the thing we thought of earlier, I think that was more interesting. The... what's not widely, publically available in a published form are say an example of a really excellent course review, because I felt that that was expertise that I had which other people didn't have. And I had got that expertise by reading my role model's fantastic course review when I was part of that course team. Now if that was publically available then [indistinct] ...and reading other people's course handbooks. I mean, I collect them - I've got about nine! [laughs] People like to read other people's course handbooks. And maybe their course review documents could be the same.

Furthermore, strong disciplinary focus in responses led several participants to question the relationship between the various LTSN subject centres, and the location of the project.

Why would the generic centre do this rather than the subject centres, because I think that the subject centres should do this, because if you want to look for, say, and MSc in Medical Physics you want to go to the Physics LTSN and look at their web site, and see some examples that are more likely to be subject specific.

Certainly the search strategies described by participants seemed to start from their own discipline, and then work 'outwards' through related disciplines, rather than going straight for a generic search.

I would look not only at the absolute subjects, say, it's [course subject] - I would look at those other related disciplines that might actually, that do actually impact upon my area. So I would go to Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Atmospheric Chemistry, Engineering, and Architecture. I would look at those automatically.

Equally, however, others felt that such disciplinary resources already existed, and that the potential value of this project lay in the inter-disciplinary synthesis of such initiatives.

I think that would miss the point entirely if that went subject by subject. Forget it. [...] I think that if you told me to choose, because there isn't the money for both, then I would go for the generic. Because I can deal... with my subject, I'm more likely to be able to find things on my own without the support that would provide. So if you were to say choose because there isn't the money for both...

The issue of where the project should be located - or at the least, where access points into a shared resource could be created - will need to be considered in order to address this issue.

Other issues for resource provision

Even where novel forms of information were identified that would be of value to academics, the actual use of these resources may be problematic, as there were concerns that they would not necessarily 'transfer' successfully from one context to another.

So much of this information is institution-specific and it is specific to the institution in terms of the type of student that you get and specific to the institution in terms of its particular mission. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean that this sort of website wouldn't be useful.

It appeared that participants wished to use the site for inspiration, rather than to receive information that is 'transmitted' at them. Curriculum change would then involve a process more akin to bricolage than to straightforward copying.

Ok, you're designing a course, there isn't... there isn't the time to read huge books and to become an educationalist. Ok. So think some of the more practical things are related to the range of options that are available on how you can teach. So sort of teaching tools and methods. [So sort of a repertoire of things?] Yes, absolutely. So instead of actually talking informally to colleagues, or surfing the web and discovering what other institutions have done, you have somewhere gathered together exemplars of case studies, of problem solving approaches, of how you can, in having a large group, say, have a lecture theatre of 100, it may not be a seminar, how do you actually engage them when it's more of a traditional approach.

It is also important to note that there were a number of misconceptions about what the proposed site might address. These assumed that it would support curriculum development by providing remedial study skill or topic-specific self-study materials.

I suppose tutorials. Student self-Tutorials for students that I could say like "here is a tutorial on HTML, the basics of HTML or something you can work through at your own pace". Or a set of well-constructed Pagemaker or Photoshop examples. Worksheets would be good.

Care will need to be taken to ensure that such misconceptions avoided.

Limitations of the project

In spite of identifying a selection of ways in which the web site, or a comparable project, could support academics carrying out curriculum development work, several issues were identified which will limit this support. Unsurprisingly, these focus on time and money.

It was pointed out, for example, that resources to support this kind of work already exist, but that staff do not make use of them.

I think all the information is there, it's just having the time to find it and go through it, really. But maybe if they had general information on the web... most of it's

available already, really. I don't think the problems getting the information, it's having the time to get it.

Lack of time is a commonly encountered problem for support projects; however, it usually reflects a deeper-seated issue of conflicting priorities. This appeared to be the case in this context.

I think it's got to be promoted very heavily and people have to see that it's useful to them, and if it looks like 'oh we've got to do all this as well' they're not going to take much notice of it. But I mean, I personally found the talk that [a member of EPD staff] gave to us very useful but there were varying comments. I think one of the problems is they usually have far too much to do and to have some other organisation telling them what to do as well they've really got to see the benefits for them.

Even once the information is retrieved, however, the problems continue.

Well it's a balance between time to assimilate the information and the value of the information. There are all sorts of bodies giving out information, both [professionally] and about teaching. You do have to be selective for which you go for. I'm not that there's a lot of information that you can't get that you need for the day-to-day running of the course, that isn't on hand actually. It's - the tips for teachers course does run a supplementary course, even with that it's finding the time to go on it. It's the time to assimilate any new information that they offer I think that's the problem.

In addition, even where there is the desire to innovate, this may be hampered through a lack of resources.

Certainly there is a professional need for it, there is a gap. But what will actually influence it, and unfortunately will affect ultimately how far we can do what we want to do, is the money. The funding. And everybody knows that if you want to go down the route of making courses which are web-based, case studies which are web-based, that you are going to need resources to do that. And those resources cost money. I mean, you've only got to look at what's happening in the states - you know, The Melon [Foundation] is putting \$11m into MIT to get their courseware online.

There seems to be little that a project such as this can do to affect such cultural limitations on changing practice.

Finally, there is the important issue that the web site may help support change, but probably will not cause it, which is important to recognise in order to set realistic expectations for the project.

It's the same applied to, if you have a straightforward piece of information, the issue of whether it's best to give it to people in paper or online it's all the same issue, it's no different from that. If you're saying do we need to write a new kind of thing - no probably not, there's hundreds, because every university course team writes things like this, and there's classic open university things [indistinct]. There probably isn't a need for new material, there's a need for people to use it for their course designs.

Conclusions

Although this study set out to establish academics' needs in relation to curriculum development, there is little that can be said in any simple way about this. Instead, the study has revealed a complex picture in which revisions are composites of countless small adjustments, generic information is viewed as a poor substitution for disciplinary knowledge, and enculturation plays a far stronger role than training or set texts.

The overwhelming sense of curriculum development was that this form of practice is intimately bound up with local, contextualised issues and priorities, and that it is an inherently personal activity.

Definitely sense of the subject, that's enormously what drives it at a kind of, most abstract level, and then the particularities would be how we teach it here, what I think the students here are like - but yeah, my vision of what they subject is and should be, what's important within it, that kind of thing, enormously.

This poses a number of problems for a project that aspires to supporting this activity through the provision of a generic web site, highlighting the fact that such an initiative cannot hope to address this situation single-handed. Moreover, the possible contribution of the project is limited by existing resources and services, such as the portals supported by JISC, which already provide access to materials and information.

However, there are several modest contributions that such a project could make. These involve the development of an online database of examples and 'marginal' materials (course outlines, handbooks, review documents and so on, rather than teaching resources). This would act as a valuable source of inspiration for academics, providing ideas that would allow the extension of their existing repertoire of approaches. This value would be further enhanced by developing this in a format that can be used as part of courses for new lecturers, and also by providing tailor-made points of access from subject-specific LTSN sites, on which analyses of courses or curricula could be offered that had direct disciplinary relevance to academics.

There are recurrent problems that could be addressed. These include the inheriting courses and gathering and interpreting student feedback. If these problems could be studied, and ways of dealing with them identified, then these might form a valuable resource that would draw academics into using other parts of the site as well.