



Market Research for the Imaginative Curriculum Project

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Introduction

This research study was commissioned by the LTSN to provide research-based evidence of about the way academics view the curriculum and to inform decisions about the provision of generic information through the web site. Ten people within the University were interviewed. 3 were course leaders, 4 module leaders, 2 relatively new lecturers and an Educational Developer. We tried to cover a wide range of subject areas and these include business, built environment, computing, information management and sport and leisure.

Knowledge of LTSN

Most of the respondents (eight out of ten) were aware of the existence of the LTSN. Several felt that they had limited knowledge, one person being *'aware of the acronym and that's all'*, but they were generally clear that it is an organisation which supports learning and teaching in HE. One of the module leaders raised an interesting point reflecting perhaps the proliferation of organisations now in existence in HE and beyond remarking that *'it's very similar to lots of initials - I might have heard of it. Now I think about it I have been on the website and found the generic centre information interesting'*.

Acquiring new knowledge relating to learning teaching and assessment and curriculum

People gained new knowledge from a wide variety of sources. Those cited most often were feedback from colleagues, reading text books/ academic papers, web based information, participation in institutional staff development events, participation in subject-based conferences/workshops, gaining feedback from students, and also informal conversations.

However other, external, sources were also important for staff - professional bodies play an important role at LMU in determining requirements in a number of subject areas. Engaging in a process like QAA assessment or course review had involved staff in what had sometimes proved to be a steep learning curve!

It is not possible to differentiate easily between categories of respondent and the number and range of sources on which they drew. A 'very experienced' course leader, one module

leader and the Education Developer all mentioned a very wide range of sources and the two 'new academic teachers' made use of more than the other two 'very experienced' teachers.

Frequency of review of courses/programmes

Within the university there is a well articulated formal set of procedures for course approval and review and it is this process that all respondents were aware of. There is a minimum requirement for course teams to meet twice yearly and for the meetings to include student representation.

However, what came out clearly from the responses was that many respondents considered that review of provision is an ongoing and continuous process. As one person said *'I review my module every time I teach it'*.

So, whilst courses are reviewed annually, modules tend to be reviewed every semester. In addition there is 'a big burst' every four or five years - as courses require critical review and re-approval

External people are involved in course approval and review - practitioners, professional bodies and external examiners were all mentioned.

As indicated above, there was a strong sense that the formal review process was only part of course evaluation. One staff member said *'I think about the client group, check the handbook, deploy appropriate staff and then search for new resources'*.

In most cases a team approach was taken, although one module leader who runs a core module taught by a large number of staff said *'I take responsibility, I ask the tutors on the module and take their views into account'*. She also collates, types up and analyses the data from the student module review forms.

Information and research drawn on for review

In drawing on information for review, all respondents routinely consider what works well or not so well and everyone without exception cited student feedback as an important factor in course or module review. This included quantitative student evaluation forms, qualitative feedback, information from course representatives as well as informal feedback from students that is usually dealt with on a day to day basis.

Qualitative feedback was considered by one person to be particularly useful and he was concerned that the use of standard evaluation documentation meant that *'student feedback is now much more structured and not so helpful'*.

In addition 7 out of 10 people indicated the importance of existing course documents when carrying out course review. Half the respondents were cognisant of school as well as institutional policies.

Staff drew on other resources too, particular mention being made of the role of external examiners and use of previous examination board minutes. Staff expertise was seen as important - both personal past professional experience and the opinion of colleagues. It was deemed important to respond to the latest ideas in specialist areas and new developments in the subject were seen as being of particular importance by all staff.

Employers also have an important role in this exercise - with one member of staff mentioning the need to research the relevant industry statistics and another acknowledging the crucial involvement of the appropriate professional body.

Very few staff employ market research as such, one of them commenting that this aspect is rather weak. Only two people used peer involvement from other HEIs and one person felt that other institutions were rather secretive.

Factors/influences impacting on provision

A wide range of issues was covered here, with relatively little unanimity but inevitably there was a sense of having to be reactive to factors often beyond ones control. Certainly the external pressures are felt to be great. One person mentioned '*external scrutiny requirements*' and four others cited specifically the demands to meet QAA requirements to be of significance with Progress Files and Benchmarking both being singled out for particular mention. In addition professional bodies, once again, were seen to be a major influence on provision.

Institutional policy changes and constraints were also raised. One person referred to '*the tightening up of procedures and new regulations - is this a satisfying experience for the students?*' Certainly the changing nature of students themselves was seen to impact on provision. It was pointed out that '*Students lack the time to do the work because they are all employed*' by a member of staff teaching on part time courses for mature students. There was a feeling from another member of staff that '*poor skills of students*' was an issue.

One person summed up their perceived factors and influences as:

quality, numbers, widening participation, are students getting what they want. External factors on the curriculum determine the subject content. Actual delivery is subject to internal constraints from the centre and from staff expertise. Within our faculty we have internal competition.

Provision of institutional support for review of programmes

Three people believed there was no institutional support for review of courses, but all other respondents were aware of university structures involving faculty advisory groups (small groups of peers set up to provide a 'sounding board' for the course team) and subject advisory groups, backed up by documentation and guidelines provided by the Centre.

One person referred to receiving '*clerical support but I wouldn't expect any more*' and another spoke of '*informal ad hoc support*'. In one case it was possible to call on the marketing department and two people had made use of staff development sessions.

One of the people, who was unaware of institutional support, referred to the opportunity to '*dig out an email with a pro forma, but it's very bureaucratic*'.

These responses are interesting because in this university the Centre can point to the fact that there are many published guidelines to support staff when they are reviewing their courses or schemes. In addition there is now a regular programme of staff development dealing with precisely these issues.

Useful generic information on a web site

The responses to this question were very individualised. The following areas received some support and from a number of respondents:

- how to be creative and innovative in delivery was identified strongly
- methods of assessment - including assessment of skills
- course structures - especially those that work better than others

Other suggested needs comprised:

- advice on AP(E)L and how to incorporate it within programmes of study
- distance learning issues and guidelines
- decent web links
- equivalence of credit frameworks to the ECTS system
- insights and research about teaching and learning
- terminology of learning outcomes
- processes, guidelines and templates - 'have you done' as a prompt
- cognitive levels of student work
- others' experience of content and of ways of delivery

The educational developer felt that it would be useful to have

information on the changes in theory and practice of subject exams, government policies, external scrutiny requirements, stakeholder expectations, all in one place and up to date and regularly updated.

Useful discipline-based information on a web site

As might be expected, the responses here tended to be specific refinements of the generic expectations outlined above:

- interpretation of professional body requirements
- content and materials
- benchmarking information - subject specific examples (this from someone whose subject does not easily fall into the LTSN subject networks)
- effective links to latest research
- conference information
- teaching developments
- work case studies
- what other teachers of my subject do

From the educational developer's point of view, the factors that would help subject colleagues to use information from a web site include:

local champions, institutional authority and support, information on the local impact on the institution

Web site evaluation

There was implicit agreement that a website would be well received through the expressed interest of eight of the participants - only two were not keen to take part in evaluation.

Summary

The most striking finding was that there was very little discernible difference in the responses, based on length of service and experience or responsibility, of the members of this group of academic staff.

There was generally good awareness of LTSN among the respondents.

Staff accessed a wide range of sources for acquiring new knowledge.

All respondents seemed to be familiar with the institutional system for course review, perhaps because there is a strong institutional central steer in these matters. In addition, most people are engaged in informal continuous evaluation of their course and/or module.

Everyone tapped a wide range of sources in the search for information for course review, but identified student feedback as being a crucial source of such information. The opinions of employers and professional bodies were also deemed to be important

The regulatory agenda of QAA was cited most often in connection with factors impacting on provision.

Finally, a significant majority (8 out of 10) indicated support for the notion of a website resource around curriculum design and were willing to be involved in its evaluation.