



Market Research for the LTSN Imaginative Curriculum Project Market Research

*Stephen Wan,
Learning & Teaching Institute,
Sheffield Hallam University*

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 members of academic staff were interviewed following the interview schedule as provided by the LTSN Generic centre. Four members of teaching staff were "experienced", three were "less experienced"; two were "new" teaching staff and one supported curriculum development from a central department. Quotes included in this report are referenced according to the category that the member of staff belonged to. Each interviewee was chosen from a different School. It should be noted that in addition to the "curriculum developer" from the central department, two experienced members of staff interviewed had some sort of formal role in the area of learning and teaching development (e.g. Learning, Teaching and Assessment Co-ordinator) in addition to their teaching responsibilities.

Knowledge of the LTSN

The interviews suggest that most staff are at least aware of the LTSN but are not knowledgeable about the organisation's activities. The few members of staff who had roles or responsibilities specifically in the area of curriculum or learning and teaching development were, however, more familiar with the LTSN. For example, one experienced member of staff was a 'Learning Teaching and Assessment (LTA) Co-ordinator' for his School:

I'm aware of who they are, what they do... our particular section of it is based at Oxford Brookes. There's a sport element and a hospitality element... we in the School have links in that organisation and have communications with it [...] I think organisations like that are very helpful (experienced)

The member of staff who supported curriculum development from a central department also had particularly good knowledge and links with the network:

I know a few people who work there. I've been to conferences from my LTSN, I've used their web site (curriculum developer)

All members of staff had at least heard of the LTSN, but the new and less experienced staff tended not to know what 'LTSN' stood for or had much, if any, contact with them:

We've had emails passed on to us about the organisation, but I know very little about them (less experienced)

The implication from these indicative results suggest that some resources should be directed towards raising awareness amongst staff, with a strategy to reach those academics who may not have engaged with educational development/ research work before. Thought should be given to how the final web-based resource will engage the interest of the majority who will not have been involved with the LTSN in the past.

Acquiring new knowledge relating to teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum (TLAC)

Staff exhibited widely differing capacities to engage in a dialogue about their methods of acquiring new knowledge for TLAC. There was a clear distinction between responses given by those staff who had roles and/or responsibilities specifically for educational development and those that did not. Those that did have experience in educational development were more able to distinguish ways in which they acquired new knowledge relating to TLAC. Staff who struggled to provide a full and direct answer *tended* to be the 'new' and, to a lesser extent, 'less experienced' academic teachers. These staff members felt more at ease talking about issues relating to curriculum content, rather than new knowledge relating to TLAC. Thus much prompting and clarification of the question was required for many interviewees, and this may well be due to the fact that many staff are unused to being questioned on matters relating to TLAC, rather than curriculum content.

The importance of other staff as sources of knowledge

It was noticeable that all staff valued new knowledge acquired by making use of other teaching colleagues. 'New' academic teaching staff were particularly keen to relay this, and cited this method as being especially important:

I rely a lot on my colleagues, particularly one who I work closely with on the units, she's been working here longer than me you see... we get on well and it's good 'cause you learn a lot this way (new)

Staff also indicated that it was important to talk to colleagues casually in informal settings rather than in formal meetings:

Now that is important ... it is really important that, and yet you wouldn't articulate that as a strategy because somebody will say "Oh I'm doing this" and you say "Oh! that links in what I'm doing". Now if that comes to you on a bit of paper, you have a different response because you don't read all papers, you think that (with) paper documents "I've got to reply formally. (curriculum developer)

Staff would not always explicitly identify other colleagues as rich sources of knowledge or information. However, through the course of their interviews they would very often refer to other teaching staff in scenarios where they required feedback or advice. This may be a result of the 'taken for granted' notion that working within a team environment of various teaching experiences is a 'natural' or 'given' process of acquiring new knowledge about TLAC. It was notable that staff frequently referred to a collective "we're" or "we've" as opposed to a singular "I've".

... we've been working together... it's an attempt that we're making to try to make the student experience a little more dynamic. (less experienced member)

[...] because we work as a big group, there's 5 teaching staff and we communicate a lot. Things like making sure that we're consistent as far as we can be in terms of student feedback. (experienced member)

Student Centred Practice - being reflective and responsive

In general terms, staff also said that simply teaching, experimenting and working through the process of designing and writing modules had provided much new developmental knowledge. All staff routinely participate in an ongoing responsive cycle of updating and enhancing their courses. Their narratives would invariably be accompanied with on discourse of emphasising the centrality of student feedback (both formal and informal) in the process of improving course delivery by directly informing course/module design and development.

We're aware of the real problem of the lecture format [...] this has been on the basis of the research we've done on student attention during a lecture presentation. So for example we're trying to break up the lecture into segments and there's going to be two members of staff involved in presenting one lecture, using video presentation and traditional lecture presentation (less experienced)

I think that's mega important (student feedback). Because they're the people who it matters to at the end. And I find that that's one of the things that informs your curriculum and what you should be teaching else you wouldn't be doing it ... (new)

Staff development events can be useful

Both departmental and institutional staff development events were generally highly valued by members of staff. Examples of various useful events were cited, with departmental events usually subject/disciplinary based, and institutional events on generic TLAC issues such as assessment and e-learning. Participation in staff development events was particularly important for experienced academics. This is probably much to do with the fact that they are themselves heavily involved in organising and running seminars and workshops:

...yes they are useful, if only for refreshing ideas and promoting discussion. (experienced member)

*I run them... we have a lot partly because of subject review to be honest. I mean a lot of the things that we do, we do so that we could demonstrate that we're doing them, but they **do** have a beneficial effect... (experienced member)*

Formal review processes are not always helpful

It is clear that the majority of staff are not enticed to engage in formal processes for the purpose of TLAC development. Only one academic thought that formal review processes (e.g. QAA subject review), had been positive and useful for TLAC development. There were a

number of strong critiques around the non-use of course/departmental committee meetings as a forum for discussing matters of TLAC:

*I mean I personally found the experience - it was **enlightening**, I'm not sure whether it was constructive [...] It was more to do with issues around producing the right paper work, the right evidence. I think given that I was relatively a new member of staff, it was certainly enlightening in terms of the **lack** of discussion around teaching and learning [...] What is discussed are other managerial, procedural, bureaucratic issues that you have to get through. (less experienced member)*

*I don't find them particularly helpful, there tends to be a political agenda attached with that sort of thing and I would rather **not** be influenced in that way, I'd rather make my own mind up. (less experienced member)*

I don't really think so. I don't think those formal processes help you do that (inform TLAC development). I don't think the feedback is of that ilk. (experienced member)

Such feedback from the interviews strongly indicate that staff, through experience, believe formal review processes to be inappropriate vehicles with which to obtain knowledge relating to TLAC (rather than being unworthy per se). In addition to this, staff were generally averse to reading **policy documentation** because they saw little value in their capacity to improve the learning and teaching experience. Staff felt that it was more appropriate and productive to use time to read and research around disciplinary literature to inform teaching:

It's not a priority... if I sit around doing that, I'll not have the time to prepare for the teaching which really matters. (new)

The nature of the 'review process'

The interviews revealed two distinct levels in which staff engaged when asked how often they reviewed their courses/modules.

At one level, staff articulated the formal review process by which the institution requires across all Schools in the university:

There is an ongoing quality review that takes place of units, subject areas, overall courses, the years of courses, and we have to write reports on those. So I will write an overall report of the entire programme every year, every course within that programme, with statistics, input statistics, students entering our courses, and that goes to the internal academic quality sub-committee. (experienced)

*Review happens at least annually in the summer and we follow university processes and guidelines like producing an evaluation and an action plan which involves looking back at what happens and planning for the next year. There's the course committee body which involves students, student reps and the course leader and these meetings are minuted. And then there's the course review body which involves **just** teaching staff and the course leader reviews how the year went. (experienced)*

Validation (and revalidation) was the major formal mechanism that staff alluded to when addressing 'review' of provision. Course validation was said to be part of the same process as programme validation and happens every five years for every programme. Staff firmly believed that courses and programmes change significantly as a result of the revalidation process. Indeed the life span of many courses and modules were said to be for five years or less, usually as a result of responding to development in the subject area. All members of staff said that external people were involved in validation processes of programmes, courses and modules. However, none said that external people were involved in reviewing modules.

All module leaders explained that modules would be reviewed every year with requirements by the School to complete module review sheets and to write summaries of how well they felt the module went. This would be part of a formal system whereby each module had a corresponding module file, which contain other components such as a section devoted to recommending changes for the future. Two experienced module leaders stated that as a result of this module review process, they never taught a module in the same way in consecutive years. But the interpretation of the 'module review' process varied according to staff responsibilities. The new staff interviewed did not talk about formal mechanisms as much as their experienced peers. This maybe because they were less familiar with the procedures. They were, however, interested in talking about matters such as drawing on peer support within teaching teams (if there were any), ad hoc student feedback, student marks and a general awareness of 'how the module went' through their teaching experience as being ingredients of the module review process. Whilst all staff were fully aware of the university's internal review processes, the majority also saw the review process as operating on a second level in a more holistic sense that involved ongoing reflection and continuous review. This was perceived as being quite distinct from the staged internal processes:

I've just been through a process where the unit that I teach, where we've just been moderating student exam papers, but the moderation process involves much more than just saying this student's ok, this student isn't ok. The other things that it does is that it makes us think about why things have happened the way they have. (experienced member)

... you have the opportunity, again in informal settings, to feedback into how that unit is running during and at the end of the teaching year. (less experienced member)

Information and research when reviewing modules/courses/programmes

All staff drew on information and research that related to gaining qualitative and quantitative information from students. This included evaluation questionnaires and analysis of student marks. Staff were more concerned with what students thought and how they performed on modules and courses than any other factor.

With prompting, some staff reported that they familiarised themselves with external information such as QAA benchmark statements and professional body documents. Similarly, staff also said that they were interested in keeping abreast of new developments in their subject area and looking at courses at peer institutions. However, it appeared that these were minor influences on the review process.

Factors currently impacting on modules/courses and programmes

There were a range of issues that staff raised around the factors which impacted heavily on their provision. Some were recurring factors raised by members of staff of all levels of teaching experience. Factors were often inextricably linked together by the same members of staff, thus indicating that their concerns could not necessarily be addressed by tackling issues in isolation.

Lack of time was the most frequently cited factor that was currently impacting on staff provision. Staff on the whole do not believe that they are allocated enough time to fit in all aspects of their role as teaching academics. Curriculum development was often seen to be "*something I try to fit in when I can*" on top of other duties such as formal teaching, marking and research activities which take priority.

If you're committed to the subject area then you have to find the time to develop the unit. So when you're not teaching, when you're dealing with marking and assessment and so on, it's important to try to find the time to commit to curriculum development. That is a real problem. [...] It means my research activities, my writing is squeezed into increasingly my own personal time at the expense of self-managed time, that we in theory have. (less experienced member)

Because at the moment I'm in the thick of it, just thinking 'well we just need to get teaching you know' ... I haven't got time to think of anything else. I've got 25 hours teaching this week, similar next week. Got no time ... time is a big thing, I mean I keep coming back to that don't I? (new member)

Staff would also state that 'a lack of time' also meant a **reduction in student contact time** exacerbated by **large increases in student numbers**. As a result of these major concerns, staff would sometimes express feelings of tensions between **maintaining academic standards** and **time constraints**:

Staffing ratios are going up to 25:1 and that is a major issue. It means that we're trying to provide a high quality higher education experience almost invariably to relatively large numbers of students (experienced member)

Traditionally we've taught 3 hours for a half unit. 6 hours for a full 20 credit unit. Now we're being asked to deliver in 2 hours and 4 hours (respectively). And we're being asked to do this without eroding the amount of quality of material that we're delivering (experienced member)

Furthermore, there was also an added dimension of maintaining academic standards in relation to **widening of access** to higher education:

There are issues to do with students and student numbers, the breadth of educational experience that people are coming in with. (curriculum developer)

Because of widening access, there's a tension between academic standards and widening access. And at the moment we try and do both. We try to maintain standards, but we've got more students, fewer staff, less student contact time

and it's one of the reasons why we get a high attrition rate... (experienced member)

This was of particular concern to an experienced member of staff who said his School was "*acutely concerned*" about the changing pattern of students being produced as a consequence of changes in the post 16 year old framework. His concern was the decline in mathematical standards within the AS level framework, and the impact that would have on his colleagues having to deliver extra provision for remedial work.

It appeared that many staff saw the above issues as creating a 'catch 22' situation and felt that these factors are having a detrimental effect on student learning, despite acknowledging institutional support for developing and promoting good teaching practice.

Financial constraints and **pressures to recruit** students were other factors that a couple of staff mentioned as being pertinent to their Schools:

Increasingly, the amounts of income generation are new pressures that are definitely on the horizon (less experienced member)

Financial constraints, management funding or lack of it. And apparently to employ as many students as poss. - to acquire as many students as possible. (less experienced member)

One member of staff believed that financial constraints and the pressures to increase student numbers are evidenced by the way that "*they've designed our curriculum*". It was argued that there was a lack of uniqueness in different degree routes offered and at all levels of the undergraduate programme:

We have a lot of core units that everybody takes and I don't necessarily think that's a good thing [...] we get very generic, mandatory units now (less experienced member)

The upshot of this was that generic learning outcomes and generic assessment tasks are becoming more commonplace, and that students might not see the value in staying on beyond the first year if they feel they will graduate with a "*very generic degree*".

Some staff agreed that new factors and changes in the higher education environment required them to "*look at how we teach*" and to find alternative means of delivery such as more innovative **use of technology**. For one member of staff, it was felt that the use of e-learning technologies was a necessity for providing flexibility and additional support for distance learning students. It was also said that it was important to be seen to be using e-learning and technology to "*maintain market positions*".

Two members of staff indicated that their subject disciplines were particularly defined by **professional body requirements** and, as such, their curricula would have to adhere to certain standards:

We are also answerable to professional bodies and in many instances the professional bodies requirements supersede those of the university. So we have to devise courses which will meet professional body accreditation. (experienced member)

It was interesting to note that the curriculum developer from a central department took a slightly different angle to that of teaching staff in the Schools. Whilst readily acknowledging that academics were facing challenging times, this academic believed that a broad issue impacting on teaching staff was the issue of transparency and staff being "unused to articulating standards that they're looking for". It was also thought that the issue of 'a lack of time' was more of a perception rather than a reality for teaching staff because "in my experience, academics do make time". It was argued, that coupled with the resourcing issue, there was a challenge for "people having to think a bit more laterally about how they can achieve something that's got quality underpinning it in a more efficient way".

Information to help staff with curriculum design when reviewing course/module provision

It should be noted that the majority of staff appeared to struggle with the task of generating ideas or requests for useful information that would help them with their curriculum design. Asking staff about what information they would find useful at national level revealed very interesting variations in discourse between staff. Some staff framed their response to the question solely in terms of structures and systems:

If there was going to be a national one (web site), then there's got to be unanimity of agreement with the structures within the university with that system. It's no good having a national set of guidelines to which people within the LTI (Learning and Teaching Institute), people on the University Standing Panel, people within Registry, don't agree with if it doesn't fit in with the university framework. (experienced member)

Staff who interpreted curriculum design in this manner did have difficulty with providing suggestions for a web site that they found hard to visualise. Other staff contended that curriculum and course design was not only heavily affected by structure and systems, but was also a personal process that is subject to other influences:

It's difficult to say. It depends on exactly what the web site will be for. You could have stuff about learning outcomes, what to put in a unit description and stuff, but it would be nice to have a debate about what the curriculum really means to people. For me it's more than just making sure your unit spec. looks right, it's about all sorts of things like where my teaching is going, where the subject is going and what I'm going to put in my units. (experienced member)

Thus, while these staff were able to provide some requests for useful information for the web site, some of them cautioned that a central resource at a national level could become confusing for staff to use:

To have some other approach promoted as this central resource might be confusing. It's confusing enough already every time you go through validation, and good practice ideas develop each time. Each time there's something new to do like learning outcomes, then learning outcomes linked to assessment criteria, benchmarking then programme specification. So there's already plenty to do just by using internal process, procedures and resources with recent developments. It could be even more complicated and messy to go outside of that, especially if it conflicts with what we do internally. (experienced)

The following are the ideas provided by the interviewees:

- Guidance on how to formulate **learning outcomes** and how learning outcomes should change as you move up through the undergraduate levels.
- Advice on good practice of what **module and course guides** should include.
- Examples and critiques of **module descriptors**.
- Information and advice on different forms of **assessment** (e.g. portfolio based assessment).
- Information and critiques of **structures and systems** that other people use when planning or developing courses (e.g. course committees or planning groups).
- Information and advice on the "*common currency*" of **credit allocation** - how do you know that all 10 credit units are of the same value?
- **Discussion boards** around a certain topic of TLAC that last for a finite period (e.g. a 3-week discussion board on assessment criteria).
- Some sort of **database** with a keyword search facility, that would allow staff to look at module descriptions of other universities to see where the 'market' was going and to inform ideas.
- **Subject specific resource bases** - research, evidence and database sources.

Conclusions

Be clear about what is meant by the term "Curriculum"

An undercurrent that emerged from the interviews was that the term "curriculum" seemed to encapsulate different entities and conceptual ideas for different interviewees. This was most explicit when staff required the interviewer to clarify what the LTSN meant by the term "curriculum" and also with the vastly different approaches and capacities that staff answered questions. Furthermore, the terms "curriculum design" and "curriculum development" generated a whole array of related discussion around teaching, learning and higher education in general, suggesting that there is not necessarily a consensus as to what they mean. One member of staff actually stated that she would be cautious about imposing her idea of what curriculum meant on to another academic. Sheffield Hallam University was said by a number of staff to have a very particular definition of what constitutes curriculum design. Staff believed that within its own local context of institutional priorities and aims, the implementation of templates and other protocol meant that curriculum design may comprise of something quite different from another university. This has important implications for the web site, in that it cannot be assumed that definitions are understood in the same way across all institutions, or that users will engage with the content as intended. Content of the web site may conflict with both individual (conceptual) and institutional (structural frameworks) around curriculum design. There is a potential barrier to web site use if staff believe that internal structures and frameworks are (i) sufficient or (ii) non-compatible with the web site content because it would lead to confusion. There is a need to consider whether the web site would like to be presented as an authority on "curriculum" or merely be a medium by which to promote discussion and engagement. In either case, it will be important to present curriculum as a concept that can take the form of different models.

Where is the market, who is the audience?

In light of the findings that reveal staff, generally, have a very poor knowledge of the LTSN and its activities, there should be a clear dissemination strategy that will reach beyond the

enthusiasts of those already involved in TLAC development. When asked what staff would like to see on the web site, it was clear that staff already know of other web sites that they access for improving their provision (mainly discipline specific). Consequently, some staff questioned the need for "yet another" web site because they suffer from "information overload". A crucial point, therefore, is that the deliverable needs to be distinct from others already on the internet (e.g. from material already on LTSN and QAA web sites); one which provides clear and 'non-fuzzy' content addressing specific and pertinent questions/problems, so that its use can be targeting and efficient in terms of time and energy. Whilst showing some differences in areas between categories of staff, the research conducted at Sheffield Hallam suggests it cannot be assumed that any category of staff will necessarily make more use of such a central resource than another category. That said, there is clearly potential that new and less experienced staff will value a central resource if the content is pertinent to them. For example, they did appear to express more interest in knowing more about techniques for teaching approaches (e.g. use of different assessment methods) and exemplar unit descriptors. Experienced staff, generally, felt more confident about their capacity to revise and improve their courses. However, these staff were still interested in what other universities were doing and would be intrigued to find out if it would be possible to access curriculum information (e.g. module descriptors) for their particular subject area.

Be strategic about content and delivery

The research did reveal some consensus among staff, mainly in the area of using staff and students as sources for new knowledge and also the recurring factors that came up in the interviews when staff were asked about what factors were impacting on their courses. There may be a case for giving priority to developing resources to address some of the 'real' pressing concerns at the moment for teaching staff, such as how curriculum design can help deal with large student numbers with wide ranging academic backgrounds.

Given that formal processes do not seem to provide useful fora for discussing TLAC matter, and that staff are intrigued by what other staff/universities are doing, it may be useful to create some provision on the web site for academics to discuss or share ideas. The suggestion of discussion boards around specific topical TLAC issues for a finite period could be one way to bring focus to the web site. The suggestion to provide module descriptors or specifications for online critique in order to promote discussion around areas such as learning outcomes, could also help to stimulate interest.

Building an ethos

With such an immense spectrum of considerations to take on board, the web site may be in danger of lacking focus and identity if the content becomes fragmented due to pandering to all stakeholders, all problem areas and all current 'hot topics'. The ultimate consideration for the Imaginative Curriculum Project will be to provide a compelling reason for staff to use the web site. This begs the question of whether the proposed web site is attempting to address a problem that does not necessarily exist in the minds of practitioners on the ground. Instead of simply becoming a compilation 'toolkit' for curriculum design, the deliverable could adopt an alternative approach by promoting itself as a web site with an ethos that seeks to achieve a goal that the eventual target audience would be able to identify with and command with a shared vision. One option could be to promote the web site as an educational product that would be free of 'undesirable' elements that have historically impinged on traditional curriculum design. This could involve creating a web site that attempts to co-ordinate a freethinking and evolving academic curriculum that explores the dilemmas involved for practitioners, rather than an bold attempt to solve a 'problem' which is not easily identifiable.