Designing Relevance into Business Curricula:
a processual model for higher education

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Keywords: *curriculum design, higher education, business education, evaluation, assessment, teaching and learning*

Introduction

With little or no money available for speculative investment in new programmes, universities – in the UK and elsewhere – need to strive for relevance and what the Advance Institute of Management Research calls organizational impact in their course offerings. This paper presents an approach to curriculum design that links the pedagogical concerns of quality standards and knowledge creation to the commercial imperatives of funding and development of third-stream income.

In the real world of higher education, the power of the purse lies just below the surface of many decisions on curriculum design. On the one hand we wonder: Is there really a market for this course? On the other, we ask: Does this project meet the academic standards we hold to uphold? These issues will rise to the fore as universities follow the advice contained in the research on the future of business education in the UK from the Advanced Institute for Management Research (2006), which sought to direct us to adopt clear positioning in the increasingly competitive marketplace, where training companies and other non-universities can now apply for degree-granting status. The AIM Research paper suggests four broad orientations (Social Science, Liberal Arts, Professional School, Knowledge Economy) that a business school might take. For many, especially those with limited access to traditional research funding, this advice will lead to growing focus on a "Professional" orientation with its emphasis on organizational impact. The implication may well be to move even closer in a commercial direction.

This current paper suggests a model for programme development to ensure the academic purpose of a plan while providing business justification. It is particularly aimed at development of professional courses that aspire to be more than industrial training. It applies more easily to larger business schools, which already offer a wide range of courses and which are looking to differentiate their offerings through focused expansion of the curriculum.

Curriculum design for business subjects

Design process issues

Toohey (1999) proposed a largely internal looking approach to curriculum design, to which we add here more explicit consideration of the external requirements, at the levels of both content and values. Toohey's two-stage process map (pp. 28-29) emphasises the needs for explicit consideration of beliefs and values in education both within the broad goals of the programme and in the more content-specific area of "what should be taught". Hartman and Warren (1994) identify similar issues and suggest an approach that ensures course requirements are matched against resources - a consideration which is echoed in the model presented here.

Teaching and assessment philosophy

Following Toohey (1999) and Ross (2000), the teaching approach will need to be interactive, and it is precisely here where issues of coherence may arise in a modular curriculum, especially one in which, for fiscal reasons, it may not make business sense to develop many new modules when there remains capacity to include more students in existing teaching sessions. The issue of coherence is considered at greater length below.

The context of many curriculum projects lies in matching the market need for specific, professional knowledge with the standards of higher education for an inquiry-led approach to the generation of knowledge. Following Ross (2000), such projects require blending a "progressive-developmental" or "pedagogic" model with the "classical-humanist" or "academic" model of curriculum. In the former, the accent lies on the process of learning, as opposed to being content-driven. The latter is not – and never has been – as static as Ross's model might suggest, for the more "academic" approach, especially at a postgraduate level, is indeed truly academic, involving the discovery of knowledge, not just its transmission to students.

A corollary is the "cognitive" approach to curriculum design (Toohey 1999, pp. 55-59). In practical terms, the implications of this approach are that a programme needs less emphasis on breadth of content and more on mastering concepts. Assessment needs to allow the demonstration of complex understanding and problem-solving, with teaching focused on real-life examples. Among the implications we can draw, therefore, is that as a professional-style qualification, a business school programme would need an assessment strategy that is criterion-referenced, with considerable opportunities for formative feedback, and emphasizing case studies drawn (where possible) from contemporary, real-life situations. This can be a difficult issue when the fiscal imperatives of the university require a modular approach, in particular drawing on modules developed for another programme - in effect, reusing the elements of design for a different curriculum. To help address such issues, a systematic model for curriculum development is proposed below. Drawing in part

on Whittington's (2001) classification of theories of strategy, it suggests an emergent process serving multiple outcomes in a low-cost, low-risk model. It also addresses in outline the issues of assessment and teaching and dealing with the potential loss of coherence in such an approach.

A balanced, inside-outside approach

Course designers need to work through three principal phases: one strategic, a second operational and tactical, and a third dealing with post-launch issues of evaluation and programme extensions:
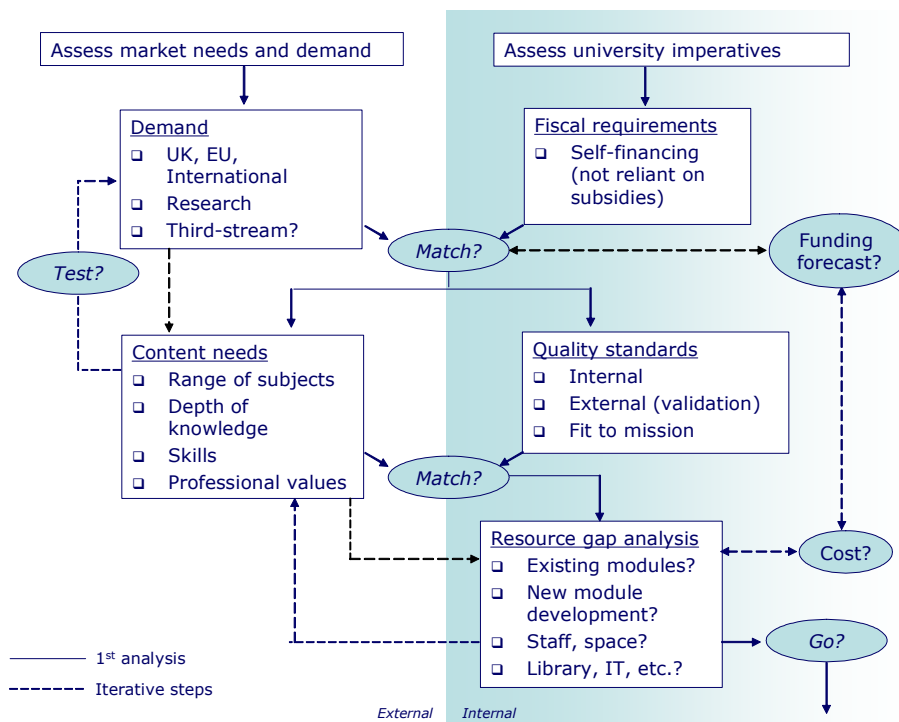

Figure 1 - strategic analysis

Figure 1 describes a strategic analysis of external requirements and internal capabilities, in order to assess the feasibility of the project. The right side of the diagram deals with internal considerations against which market demand and needs have to be compared. Universities cannot afford a development that requires significant up-front spending, almost irrespective of the expected payback. In allocating resources, they prefer projects that show the capability of generating a surplus and attracting third-stream income from activities such as consultancy or an externally funded research institute.

But there is more to organizing a university degree programme than a good business case. Consideration must be given to the content needs associated with potential students, their future employers and the professional bodies likely to inform their future career development. These content needs will be compared with the quality standards of the university, the university's mission and the validation requirements

for higher education, to check that these criteria can be satisfied. At the same time, comparison is made with existing resources to ascertain what additional resources are necessary and viable.

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

The recruitment plan looks at how the programme can be marketed to potential students, drawing upon the professional bodies and potential employers as well as the university's conventional marketing activities.
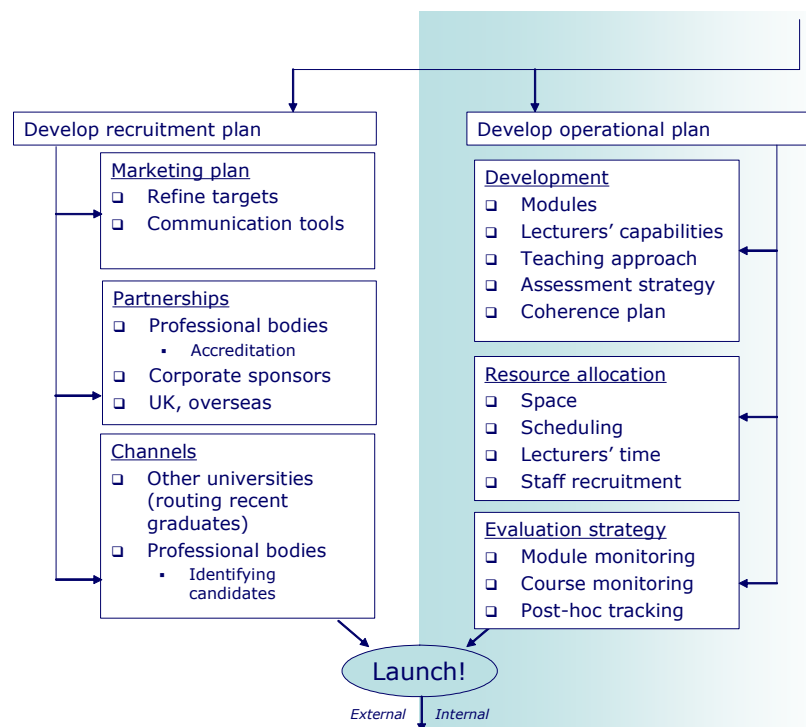
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┌─────────────────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Develop recruitment plan    │              │ Develop operational plan    │
└─────────────────────────────┘              └─────────────────────────────┘

    ┌─────────────────────────┐                  ┌─────────────────────────┐
    │ Marketing plan          │                  │ Development             │
    │  ❑ Refine targets       │                  │  ❑ Modules              │
    │  ❑ Communication tools  │                  │  ❑ Lecturers' capabilities│
    └─────────────────────────┘                  │  ❑ Teaching approach    │
                                                 │  ❑ Assessment strategy  │
    ┌─────────────────────────┐                  │  ❑ Coherence plan       │
    │ Partnerships            │                  └─────────────────────────┘
    │  ❑ Professional bodies  │
    │     ▪ Accreditation     │                  ┌─────────────────────────┐
    │  ❑ Corporate sponsors   │                  │ Resource allocation     │
    │  ❑ UK, overseas         │                  │  ❑ Space                │
    └─────────────────────────┘                  │  ❑ Scheduling           │
                                                 │  ❑ Lecturers' time      │
    ┌─────────────────────────┐                  │  ❑ Staff recruitment    │
    │ Channels                │                  └─────────────────────────┘
    │  ❑ Other universities   │
    │    (routing recent      │                  ┌─────────────────────────┐
    │    graduates)           │                  │ Evaluation strategy     │
    │  ❑ Professional bodies  │                  │  ❑ Module monitoring    │
    │     ▪ Identifying       │                  │  ❑ Course monitoring    │
    │       candidates        │                  │  ❑ Post-hoc tracking    │
    └─────────────────────────┘                  └─────────────────────────┘

                        (  Launch!  )
                    External │ Internal
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Figure 2 - tactical phase

Echoing Hartmann and Warren (1994), the tactical stage also needs to consider curriculum operational issues – especially the resource gaps identified in the strategic phase. Of particular importance are issues concerning the teaching approach, assessment strategy and a plan to ensure coherence within the modular structure. When considering an appropriate fit of assessments, planners might find it useful to draw on the thinking that has informed group assessment design (Nordberg 2006).

While any degree programme could be considered in isolation, the nature of a university is, indeed, to expand the body of knowledge as well as transmit it through course participation. For that reason, the model includes a third phase which elaborates on strategic-stage thinking about opportunities for research and possible "third-stream" income from consultancy or related interaction with the business

world whose interests the programme aims to meet. At the same time, iterative enhancement of the *degree* programme requires execution against of plans for evaluation developed in detail during the second stage. This institutional learning then feeds back into the curriculum design and delivery (Figure 3).
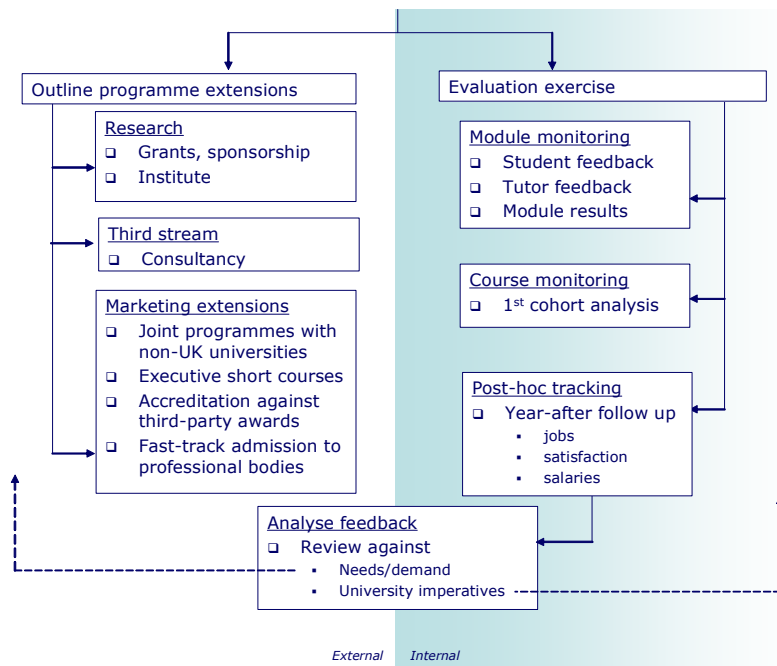
Outline programme extensions

Research
- Grants, sponsorship
- Institute

Third stream
- Consultancy

Marketing extensions
- Joint programmes with non-UK universities
- Executive short courses
- Accreditation against third-party awards
- Fast-track admission to professional bodies

Evaluation exercise

Module monitoring
- Student feedback
- Tutor feedback
- Module results

Course monitoring
- 1st cohort analysis

Post-hoc tracking
- Year-after follow up
  - jobs
  - satisfaction
  - salaries

Analyse feedback
- Review against
  - Needs/demand
  - University imperatives

External   Internal

Figure 3 - extensions and evaluation

Course coherence

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

Knight (2001) outlines the hazards of a loss of coherence, especially in strongly process-driven curriculum development, such as the model presented here. While this looks on the surface to fit the category of the "rational planning" approach - which he decries as based on the flawed assumption of a "determinate and linear universe" (p. 372) - the iterative steps of checking curriculum design against external needs actually suggests a process akin to a developmental one. Drawing on Richard Whittington's framework for categorizing approaches to business strategy (Whittington 2001), curriculum design, too, can have single or multiple intended outcomes, and deliberate or emergent processes to get there. As Whittington argues, however, much of the development of thinking in the strategy world has rejected as too narrow-minded that single-outcome, deliberate-process approach of what he termed the Classical theory of strategy. Indeed, almost 40 years ago Henry Mintzberg wrote about the need for emergent strategies (Mintzberg 1967), creating

a school of strategy that Whittington came to think of either as "evolutionary" when aimed at a single goal, or as "processual" when serving multiple outcomes simultaneously. Viewed in those terms, this model for curriculum design is distinctly "processual".

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

Students joining the programme, especially in the early stages when cohort numbers are low, will find themselves in modules where the majority of students are taking very different courses, and where module tutors may well have sculpted the content to meet the expectations of the majority without consideration of a needs of the new students or the context of their studies.

Perkins (2003) suggested a series of extra, cohort meetings to give students in the same field a chance to meet as a group – with the programme leader – in cross-curricular seminars, to create a "balance between pedagogical objectives and economisation of resources" (p. 17) and to enhance relevance of theoretical perspectives gained in the constituent modules . While a useful contribution, it is not clear where that would fit into existing university structures. Given the competition for space and resources, it looks – at least in early stages of any programme – as something that would come from the goodwill of the programme leader. Hopefully, if the programme is successful in attracting a reasonably substantial number of students, further module development can begin to address any issues in coherence.

Conclusion

This processual model for curriculum design deals with the specific issues that frequently arise in development for business subjects, where the canon of academic knowledge needs to be framed and developed for a specific set of commercial and professional imperatives of outside constituencies. Moreover, it suggests how this can be done in the context of the need for low-risk, low-investment approaches from the university.

But the process is of more general application: other subject areas need to be cognisant of the negative feedback loops coming from graduates who – if not in the immediate afterglow of graduation, then a year or two later – become negative ambassadors for a course that did not meet their needs. Moreover, as the hunt for research funding from non-governmental sources and other third-stream income continues, this model offers a checklist to help a university explore the potential for

this within its *existing* programmes as well as new ones, while also fine-tuning delivery of teaching and the facilitation of learning.

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Biographical note

Donald Nordberg is Senior Lecturer in Strategy and Marketing at London Metropolitan University. A long-time journalist and editorial executive, he worked in information businesses in Germany, Switzerland, the US and the UK, before moving into academic life. He has BA and MA degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an MBA (with Distinction) from Warwick Business School. His working papers are available from Social Sciences Research Network at http://ssrn.com/author=475919.

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