

Curriculum development: experiences of academic in an ODL context

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Introduction

Curriculum development includes a variety of activities around the creation of planned curriculum, pedagogy, instruction and delivery methods for guiding student learning. The shape of curricular in universities has come under scrutiny, with internationalisation, africanisation and decolonisation as contemporary issues in curriculum development and higher education in general. However, very little about the lecturers as curriculum developers is included in the dialogues regarding curriculum development. This report aims to share an interpretive analysis of the lecturers' experiences of curriculum development.

The context

This was a case of one department offering Nursing and Public Health programmes in an ODL university. The lecturers were engaged in curriculum development to align new programmes to the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM), new SAQA level descriptors and HEQSF. The department embarked on curriculum development with the assistance of the university curriculum and programme accreditation directorates. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of lecturers regarding curriculum development in an ODL context. The focus was on issues fundamental to development of new programmes; and design of online modules as expressed by the lecturers. The argument is that for academics to revise or develop a new curriculum they must be well equipped with knowledge, capacity and resources, as well as clear procedures to follow.

The inquiry procedures

Lecturers for different disciplines participated in the study. A narrative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) was used to explore their experiences of curriculum development. The process involved two 1-hour round table group discussions of 9 and 10 lecturers; with each preceded by individual written narratives. This was a form of data triangulation method; with an aim to have collective reflective group conversations and written personal experiences. The conversations lasted approximately 1hour 30 minutes each.

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of the University and the Department where the lecturers worked. South Africa's research ethics system and infrastructure guidelines require that proposals to conduct research involving humans undergo independent ethics review before the research begins (Department of Health, 2015:2-3). This project involved lecturers who are health care practitioners; and also employees of a health sciences education department in a higher education institution. Therefore it was a requirement to have two ethical clearances which were granted by the Research Ethics Committees of the Department of Health Studies and the University

respectively. The REC of the mentioned department is registered with the NHREC as required by the NHA s 73(1) (Department of Health, 2015:11). Following receipt of the first ethical clearance from the department in October 2015, the proposal was submitted to the University REC requesting permission to use emails and collect data from university staff in respect of the study. The proposal was considered and ethical approval was granted in February 2016. Data were collected in March 2016.

The round table discussions with the lecturers took place over two days, held in the departmental boardroom for the convenience of the lecturers. Appointments for the discussions were arranged via email. An information leaflet was sent to the lecturers along with the invitation, wherein it was explained that acceptance of the invitation and voluntary participation in the discussion group would constitute consent to participate in the study. The conversations were audio recorded with the permission of the lecturers; and transcribed verbatim, read and reduced to make sense in line with the written narratives. Similar content were grouped together, interpreted and presented in narrative form.

Findings

The narrative inquiry revealed the following in relation to their experiences of curriculum development: pedagogical considerations for, and challenges related to curriculum development.

Pedagogic considerations for ODL curriculum development

The data from the conversations indicated that the lecturers had sound knowledge of the steps in curriculum development in general. What came out from curriculum development was that the development or transformation of a course should respond to the new needs of individuals and the society; and also be student-centered. The focus was on constructivism. The lecturers were of a view that for online courses; curriculum development should also take into consideration the following:

- the teaching and learning delivery mode,
- the learning management system of the institution,
- the discipline to design a technology enhanced curriculum; and the learning outcomes should be designed to focus on core learning
- compliance of teaching and learning tools with reference to relevance, accessibility, availability and affordability
- student profile: regional distribution and capacity to use technology,
- support systems for planning WIL/experiential learning/practicals in a virtual environment
- availability of up to date ebooks

The emphasis was that the lecturers as curriculum developers should keep abreast with time and student profile such as population, language, regional distribution and capacity to use technology. The lecturers further indicated that consideration of the hidden curriculum is important especially with decolonisation; and therefore learning outcomes should be designed to focus on core learning. This was mentioned again in relation to the experience of

technology integration into the curriculum; considering the credits and notional hours required. A lesson learned was that it is important to differentiate between technology enhanced teaching and learning; and the use of media for teaching. As such the use of media should be relevant to teaching and learning methods and practices. Additionally, the emphasis was on availability of policy to ensure compliance of media used for teaching and learning. Of importance to consider when embarking on curriculum development for ODL courses was indicated to be planning WIL/experiential learning/practical in a virtual environment; which required support systems. Availability of up to date ebooks was also for consideration as early as during curriculum development. With regard to assessment, the lecturers deliberated on the need for introduction of alternative and technology enhanced methods suitable for online learning. Of concern was that the lecturers themselves seemed to lack confidence and training in the proposed alternative assessment methods and therefore needed training and support. Interestingly, they showed a positive outlook with respect to the pedagogic practices and the prospects of new online programmes.

Challenges related to curriculum development

The findings indicate that some lecturers were not part of the curriculum development team for the existing programmes which they are currently teaching; and for others, whilst they had experiences of curriculum development; it was their first time to be involved in curriculum development for ODL programmes. The lecturers acknowledged that they experienced inconsistent support and leadership during curriculum development; which led to differentiation in knowledge regarding programme classification typology (PGD vs Honours degree). This was related to the many meetings conducted without clear guidelines and several questions asked about choosing certain programmes over the others, whilst they are on the same NQF level. Red tape in organizational processes permitted uncertainty, confusion and frustration; and somewhat slow progress with curriculum.

The lecturers shared their concerns with lack of direction from the professional body with respect to directives and endorsement for the curriculum. Conflicting policies with regards to module credit allocation by the accreditation body and institution led to challenges with compliance to educational framework and institutional requirements. Their view was that the duration of the programmes to be offered and the number of credits allowed very little space for innovation with respect to application of internationalization and africanisation in the curriculum. As for other contemporary issues such as decolonisation, it could even bring about a leeway to hidden curriculum. The other challenge was lack of curriculum experts in the department, and therefore the slow progress with curriculum development. This seemed to bring about lack of commitment, as evidenced by procrastination. The lecturers reflected on themselves as more of subject experts. Furthermore, they indicated that they will continue with curriculum development to ensure active participation as to some this was a worthy learning process.

Discussion of the findings

Curriculum planning occurs at macro-, meso- and/or micro-level. Therefore, policies at different levels may interact, support or contradict each other during curriculum

development. Several legislation including the Nursing Act (Ac 33 of 2005), National Qualifications Act 2008 (Act 67 of 2008), Higher Education Act 1997 (Act 101 of 1997), Higher Education amendment Act (Act 39 of 2008), and also the university policies affected curriculum development in this context.

With the focus on the curricular being pedagogically responsive/sensitive to the context and students, a lesson learned was involvement of the students in curriculum development. The findings of the inquiry suggested that both the lecturer and the student should have technical skills and knowledge to use tools and technology for online teaching and learning; which should be considered during curriculum development. The lecturers acknowledged that course content design should be appropriate to delivery; and therefore the importance of differentiating between a programme and subject/module when designing technology enhanced curriculum.

According to Du Preez and Simmonds (2014) curriculum planners have to investigate thoroughly and carefully the nature of the qualification for which curriculum is developed. In this context, there seemed to be lack of constant communication between the specific ETQA and university/academic staff as some of the programmes were said not to have readily available directives from the professional body. On the other hand, the generic curriculum plan from macro-level requires that each institution flexibly and autonomously design their curricular to meet the desired outcomes and required number of credits at meso- and micro-levels.

Jacobs et al (2011) indicate that ‘the ability to plan effective curricula is a crucial skill for all teachers’. Interestingly, from the conversations it was noted that the lecturers had knowledge of curriculum development but lacked the urgency to embark on for new programmes despite the given timelines. This may be related to the challenges reflected by the lecturers. Schubert (1986) posits that institutional and instructional problems that can occur with curriculum development are amongst others apathy, individual differences, basic standards, teacher effectiveness and high technology.

The challenges mentioned call for clear instructions, constant communication and support from professional bodies, training and involvement from the institutional curriculum development directorate to build a shared understanding of the required processes. The needs identified are in line with academic professional development. Some of the recommendations in a report from the European Commission are that all staff teaching in higher education institutions in 2020 should have received certified pedagogic training; and continuous professional education as teachers should become a requirement for teachers in higher education (Higher Education Group on Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013).

Conclusion and practical implications

The information obtained from the project provides a reflection on the requirements for lecturers’ support to achieve academic excellence and active scholarship in curriculum development. With regards to best practice, although there are general policies and directives,

involvement of lecturers in curriculum development is essential to ensure ownership. Additional support is also needed from curriculum development departments, and multi, inter and transdisciplinary consultation is essential to ensure a collaborative effort. The study recommends a logical systematic approach to curriculum development to help solve the challenges. Information sharing session, support and clear instructions from professional or quality assurance bodies is essential. Training and involvement in curriculum development: ensure ownership. A consistent curriculum team, including educational technology team and a dedicated departmental quality assurance committee is essential to ensure on-going support.

Way forward: the conversation will continue with the relevant stakeholders!

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