Academics' perceptions of continuous and collaborative curriculum review: An Australian case study

Jennifer Bird [a, *], Thea van de Mortel [b, 1], Julienne Holt [c, 2], Maree Walo [d, 3]

[a] School of Education, Southern Cross University, Military Rd, East Lismore, 2480, NSW, Australia
[b] School of Nursing & Midwifery, Griffith University, Parklands Drive, Southport, QLD, Australia
[c] Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Military Rd, East Lismore, 2480, NSW, Australia
[d] School of Tourism and Hospitality, Southern Cross University, Military Rd, East Lismore, 2480, NSW, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Tourism and hospitality educators face particular challenges in meeting current national and international pressures and requirements for accreditation of their curricula within national standards frameworks.

Conventional curriculum design and review processes may not suffice in meeting these challenges. In other disciplines and subject areas innovative models of continuous and collaborative curriculum design processes are responding to these challenges, yet the literature on this topic is absent in tourism and hospitality education.

This case study investigates academics' experiences and perceptions of a continuous and collaborative curriculum review process introduced in a School of Tourism and Hospitality Management (STHM) at an Australian regional university.

The study found that academics valued the opportunities the process afforded to improve the curriculum from a whole-of-program perspective. The collaborative nature of the process, the opportunities for scholarship of teaching outcomes and the building of multidisciplinary relationships were also seen as positive outcomes. Concerns included a lack of clarity regarding procedures for acting upon matters identified during review and challenges associated with collaboration across multiple campuses.

© 2015 The Authors.

1. Introduction

Like all contemporary curricula in higher education, tourism and hospitality curricula face a myriad of pressures. Dredge et al. (2013, p. 99) outline the particular 'miasma' of international and national pressures impacting on tourism and hospitality education in Australia and alert educators to the fact that 'the need for closer attention to degree content, delivery, and academic standards is becoming increasingly critical.' These pressures include: credit recognition and transferability, funding linked to performance accountability, the design, maintenance and management of whole-of-program curriculum maps of graduate attributes, subject/discipline standards, threshold learning outcomes, learning-centred pedagogies and student assessment. External professional accreditation requirements, technologies that enable new and multiple modes of delivery across multiple delivery sites, and the volume and pace of production of new knowledge are additional factors in this complex mix. Conventional approaches to curriculum design and review may no longer suffice in responding to this environment.

Higher education institutions dedicate considerable effort and resources to the design of new program, and the subsequent three or five yearly formal quality assurance program reviews. However, the space in between these reviews typically remains the private and individual domain of teaching academics. Various authors (see for example Fisher, Fairweather & Amey, 2003; Briggs, 2007; van de Mortel & Bird, 2010; Hubbell & Gold, 2007) have identified the risks to curriculum cohesion and alignment associated with this

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 423635320.
E-mail addresses: jenny.bird@scu.edu.au (J. Bird), t.vandemortel@griffith.edu.au (T. van de Mortel), julienne.holt@scu.edu.au (J. Holt), mare.walo@scu.edu.au (M. Walo).
[1] Tel.: +61 7 5552 7855; fax: +61 7 5552 8526.
[2] Tel.: +61 2 6620 3712; fax: +61 2 6620 3426.
[3] Tel.: +61 2 6620 3920; fax: +61 2 6626 9155.

privatized space. These risks include: curriculum drift, curriculum fragmentation, lack of academic collaboration, and no vision of the 'whole' curriculum as experienced by learners.

New and innovative approaches to curriculum development and review are designed to address the above risks as well as improving curricula and academic practice.

There appear to be no previous tourism and hospitality case studies reporting innovative processes of continuous and collaborative curriculum review (CCCR). This study aims to fill this gap by investigating a continuous curriculum review process implemented within the School of Tourism and Hospitality (T&HM) at Southern Cross University (SCU). This School offers linked undergraduate programs in tourism, hospitality and conventions and events management across four Australian campuses and two international partner campuses.

In brief the CCCR process involves the continuous and collaborative review of undergraduate subjects by teaching academics, the Program Coordinator and academic support staff and librarians. The process occurs biannually after each semester. Academics meet in teaching teams (e.g. academics teaching first year subjects) that also include teaching and learning staff, academic skills support staff and librarians.

Teams collectively review their subjects' quantitative and qualitative student data. Teams share issues and concerns about grades, student feedback on teaching, attrition, academic integrity, assessment, content, and students at risk. Recommendations are made to individual academics for changes to specific subjects, the Program Director when suites of subjects were involved, or the Head of School for issues of resourcing, staffing, governance or management. All documentation contributes to an evidence-based-program performance portfolio that in turn informs the formal five yearly program review.

The purpose of this study is to investigate academics' perceptions of this continuous curriculum review process, their affective response to it, and their perception of the value and outcomes of the process.

1.1. Literature review

This paper draws on the conceptualisation of curriculum in higher education described by Barnett and Coate (2004: 44) who define the term curriculum, 'in significant part at least, as the set of organised processes and materials that, intentionally and unintentionally, are put before students by their educators.' They describe three levels at which curricula are designed: a) whole of discipline or subject area (for example subject benchmarks and standards), b) new programs designed-in-advance for initial accreditation, and c) the ongoing design-in-action of existing programs through the session by session, week by week and day by day adjustments of academics. At this third level Barnett and Coate (2004, p. 51) conceive of the curriculum as dynamic and in flux, always a 'curriculum in process'.

1.2. The status quo

Typically higher education curriculum design and review processes are driven by individual institutions' policies for new program approval and subsequent cycles of program review, which in turn respond to the quality and accreditation requirements of relevant national standards bodies such as the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) in Australia and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom. These two points in the lifecycle of a curriculum − initial approval and subsequent review − are policy-driven, formal and systematic. They are stakeholder inclusive, scrutinized, documented, evidence-

based and resource intensive. Program review policies usually require formal reviews every three to five years. Yet requirements for ongoing review processes within these three to five year cycles, at Barnett and Coate (2004) 'design-in-action' level, do not command the same attention or resources.

Traditional curriculum design and review processes have attracted a range of criticisms. One large UK study (cited in Dempster, Benfield, & Francis, 2012) found that current curriculum design practice lacked flexibility, systems for the regular updating of course content, collaboration, and the student perspective. Barnett and Coate (2004, p. 45) argue that 'the idea of the process of curriculum design subsisting in a timeframe in which a curriculum is first designed and then put into action has to be abandoned.'

Hubbell and Gold (2007: 11) argue that review processes amount to 'five-year summative data gathering frenzies' and should rather be considered as 'scholarly, formative and developmental'.

In traditional curriculum design and review processes, responsibility for the design-in-action space typically lies with individual academics who engage (or not) in daily adjustments to their subjects within the private and autonomous domain traditionally afforded academics. Fisher et al. (2003) investigated the tension between individual and collective responsibility for the curriculum in the design-in-action space. They argue that the tradition of academic autonomy (and its associated academic freedom) supports individualistic academic effort in relation to curriculum review and renewal; that collective responsibilities generally are not rewarded or acknowledged as they fall outside of job descriptions; that individual improvements remain inside the privacy of teaching spaces; and that aggregating individual efforts as a measure of quality in teaching, learning and curriculum is insufficient in fulfilling an academic department's curricular obligations.

Both Hubball and Gold (2007) and Briggs (2007) point out that one of the consequences of this private and individualized design-in-action space is that the curriculum is at risk of becoming fragmented rather than cohesive, and that individual units/subjects become 'islands unto themselves' (Hughes, 2007, p. 109). From the students' perspective, the curriculum can become a 'set of often fragmented and unconnected individual course learning experiences.' It becomes the students' responsibility to 'make sense of the whole (if at all)' Hubbell & Gold, 2007, p. 8).

1.3. Innovations

As far back as 1985 the Association of American Colleges and Universities called for departments to take responsibility for curriculum issues and for academics to collaborate closely in the design and renewal of cohesive programs of study such that individual academics move to a broader sense of communal responsibility and ownership of "our" students and "our" curriculum" (cited in Briggs, 2007, p. 677).

The last decade has seen an emergence of a fresh interest in new curriculum design and review processes that better respond to the contemporary demands on curricula and those who teach and manage them. In 2007 the e-Journal *New Directions in Teaching and Learning* dedicated a special issue to this topic under the title 'Curriculum Development in Higher Education: Faculty-Driven Processes and Practices'. The issue includes a variety of case studies of innovative processes of curriculum design and review in North American universities. These and a collection of Australian case studies (see for example Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004; van de Mortel, Bird, Holt, & Walo, 2012; Radloff, 2004) demonstrate a rich diversity of innovative processes across many disciplines and fields of study in higher education.