

**Creating the curriculum for ‘whoever’ and ‘whatever’:
institutional ‘consensus-seeking’ in the higher education
curriculum**

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6th Annual Conference of the Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR) Network: Productive Partnerships: Engaging stakeholders in Institutional Research
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Birmingham City University

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Title: Creating the curriculum for '*whoever*' and '*whatever*': institutional '*consensus-seeking*' in the higher education curriculum

1. Type of submission: Paper

2. Background:

This seminar reports doctoral research based on a qualitative case study of curriculum development in Higher Education (HE). It focuses on the characteristics of the practices that shape, and are shaped by, the educational beliefs and values that university teachers bring to course design and planning (Barnett, 2005; Barnett and Coate, 2005; McClean 2006). It explores the experiences of 12 teachers, from ten HE institutions, preparing to make their course practices 'open' to others 'collegially'; alongside the accounts and texts of 26 teachers, in one institution, seeking 'official approval' for their courses in the form of institutional 'validation', or who are responsible for 'developing' and 'approving' these statements of 'course design'.

Drawing on social realism (Moore and Maton, 2001), it combines Bourdieu's (1992) conception of higher education as a field, with Bernstein's (1990, 2000) notions of pedagogical discourse and knowledge codes to offer an analytical framework capable of examining the descriptions that teachers make of their practice, and the means by which this can be differentiated (Shay 2012). One aspect of this, employability, is considered with regard to aspects of relational and positional autonomy of teachers (Maton, 2005) from which an explanatory language of description can be derived.

3. Method:

This paper draws on a doctoral study (to be submitted Summer 2013) drawing on data from an extended focus group (12 teachers from 10 HEI) and an institutional case study (26 teachers). This analysis is offered in the context of the debate around how the curriculum in HE is being 'hybridised' (Young and Muller, 2007; Wheelahan, 2010) and the potential implications of a discursive gap (Bernstein, 2000) as the space between what teachers do and what they are able to say about their teaching. Drawing on the findings of the study the paper will discuss how the importance of knowledge is legitimated in the conception of the curriculum in Higher Education (Maton, 2007; Luckett 2012) and how we may need to defend theoretical knowledge in the curriculum as 'society's way of having a conversation with itself' (Wheelahan, 2010).

4. Results (250 words):

- 1) The effectiveness of descriptions of practice (curricular designs) in the form that is required by institutional course approval processes requires a looking forward and a looking backwards that is mutually constrained
- 2) Course designs are contextually detached from their sites of enactment (teaching and learning) and semantically condensed in that they are abstracted and tacit.

- 3) Strategies that enable teachers to enact course planning, design, and implementation are subject to disciplinary perspectives, dispositions to practice, and the underlying principles of knowledge and knower structures.
- 4) External influences on the curriculum such as 'employability' result in a compliance that results in a 'genericised' curriculum that is difficult to pedagogise (i.e. to teach, to acquire cumulatively, and to assess)
- 5) These conditions, in turn, affect the 'possibility' of new curricula and pedagogies
- 6) The place of theoretical knowledge in the curriculum is uncertain, contested, and 'squeezed', and increasingly replaced, or transformed, by 'practical experience'.

5. Conclusions (200 words):

- 7) Strategies that teachers find to be '*collegially focused*' are effective in as far as they can enable the meta-language needed for curricular change.
- 8) Strategies that are considered to be '*bureaucratically focussed*' are complex, intertwined and often misunderstood.
- 9) The form that curriculum development currently takes can be understood as a form of '*consensus-seeking focussed*' activity. Understanding this is important for progression and accumulation of knowledge.

6. Implications for practice (100 words) including key learning points for the IR community:

This paper informs teachers' understandings of how the curriculum is developed in HE, and the means by which this is undertaken. It highlights the need for institutional support for course design that can accommodate economic and other factors that influence its development and implementation. The importance of peer review in this is emphasised, as a means of safeguarding both the practical and the moral purposes of education.

7. Preferred Track:

Track1: Influencing Policy and Strategic Thinking: Approaches to Developing Learning and Teaching in the Modern University

8. Reason for submission to this Track:

This paper examines important areas of institutional policy and practice that affect and influence the development of curricula and pedagogy. My study indicates that a better understanding of these processes can alleviate the difficulties that face course designers and those responsible for the approval of courses.

9. Stage of Paper:

This paper emerges at a late stage of the write-up of my doctoral studies (submitted Summer 2013). It will form the basis of a publication of one of the chapters of the study and is therefore a draft / work in progress. However it will be a substantive piece of work.