

Balancing tensions in curriculum design: innovating for coherence, distinctiveness and cost-effectiveness in a postgraduate programme

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Programme context

Curricular design needs to be set in the context of the political economy of contemporary higher education and the challenge of balancing quality and flexibility.

'If you care about quality but cannot increase resources you have no option but to change methods.' (Gibbs and Jenkins, 1992, cited by Grisoni, 2002)

It is not only resource constraints that motivate an 'innovation imperative'. Improving the student experience is at the heart of quality enhancement (Newton, 2002: 4). The emergence of a more diverse student population, which is required to contribute in whole or in part to the cost of educational provision, has led to demands for greater choice and 'portability' in teaching and learning provision. Hence the arrival of 'the bite-size age' in which the process of learning has been altered in a fundamental way (Scott, 1998) – in a word: modularity. On the one hand this reformation 'has expanded the opportunities for curricular breadth, both through improved student choice and through the design of broader-based programmes' (Jackson and Gregg, 1995). On the other hand, the same authors note that modular structures have been subject to criticism on the ground of an 'alleged tendency to destroy the coherence of a programme'.

Modularity ensures that the very notion of being a student fragments beyond recognition: what were once students are more like tourists visiting the University of Disneyland, or - at best – 'doing' their modules, as if turning up at the call centre from their temp agency (Brecher, 2002).

'[C]ourse design has always been a pragmatic art' (Toohey, 1999: 8). But promoting greater choice and flexibility by reducing the level of curricular prescription may come into tension with the desire of subject teams to define programmes according to their view of coherence and integrity. And the

prerequisite cost-effectiveness in the investment of limited resources compounds the challenge. These considerations formed the back cloth for creative action by the project team assembled to design and secure validation of a new postgraduate programme in the Business and Management subject domain.

A cost-effective, distinctive and coherent design bundle

The MA in International Human Resource Management (MAIHRM) was validated in summer 2001 and ran for the first time in the academic year 2001-2002. The new award is intentionally a 'management', not a 'studies' one. It is designed to appeal to different constituencies from those of pre-existing awards at diploma and masters level under the rubric of 'employment studies' and (more domestically oriented) HRM. Nonetheless, it proved attractive for reasons of resource investment efficiency to incorporate a range of extant Business School modules offered at M-level. The modular combination selected for the MAIHRM - five 'core' components out of eight, in addition to a double-weighted dissertation - and which included a new foundation module introducing students to the discipline ^[1], was also judged to be pedagogically sound because it encompassed an appropriate mix of subject matter and learning experiences. Innovation was called for, nevertheless, endorsed by the University's validation panel. Action was taken to cement assurance that the applied curriculum design would actualise a student experience that would combine distinctiveness and coherence. An important design aim was thus to encourage (in the words of a current commentator) 'the confidence, trust and responsibility [among students] of being part of a collective, enjoying an educational challenge and being a member of a self-defined and recognisable social and cultural group' (Brecher, 2002). To that end, a series of integrative tutorials and workshops were forged into the programme's core.

In terms of content, the MAIHRM curriculum design emphasises three key issues in this applied discipline. First, it investigates knowledge claims relating to various organisational formations, work and employment arrangements so as to address trends impacting on institutions and actors of a global 'network society' (Castells, 2000). Second, thus contextualised, knowledge claims on behalf of HRM as a universally applicable paradigm are explored, thereby locating the programme's curriculum squarely within its international context. Third, there is consideration of the consequences both of the changing character of capital investment in production and business exchange in an allegedly networked context, and of contemporary management thinking, for professionals involved in evaluating and practising people management.

Coherence is fostered through programme-specific tutorial seminars with the programme leader that are conducted on a regular basis for the MAIHRM student cohort, over and above the formal teaching and learning they receive through participation in the constituent modules. Case studies and other devices serve to relate theoretical perspectives that students have been exposed to within particular modules to the whole arena of the people

management dimension of international business. This process exposes not only synergies but also tensions between the various prescriptions and models, demanding critical consideration in search of possible resolution. By requiring students to present their arguments, supported by valid evidence, in the form of mini-essays and oral articulation, for example, unique cross-programme learning is enabled. The result is a supportive environment in which students test out alternative ways of staking a claim to a distinctive MAIHRM 'graduate identity' (Holmes, 2001). As a bonus, these exercises facilitate formative assessment of student progress, the results of which can be communicated to module tutors, as well as enabling students to receive guidance on the ways in which they can refine their emerging knowledge, skills and the means to align their learning and ideological experimentation on a holistic basis. This innovation not only enhances the range of experiences open to students; it also makes a contribution towards their employability following graduation.

Conclusion

By combining a cross-curricular seminar programme with a suite of established modules, a balance between pedagogical objectives and economisation of resources is achieved. On successful completion of the programme, students are expected to have had a multiplicity of experiences that distinguish study in International Human Resource Management, while integrating the different elements via a cohesive M-level seminar programme, in an environment conducive to the development of 'critical being', i.e. critical awareness of knowledge in relation to self and the world (Barnett, 1997). Utilisation of existing modules also means that MAIHRM students benefit from cross-fertilisation of knowledge and experience with peer groups who are following general management as well as alternative specialist programmes of study. Initial student feedback has been positive. In the words of one alumnus from the inaugural year: 'The weekly tutorial gives us a chance to listen to visiting guest speakers from leading businesses and to tackle problem-solving exercises relating to the real world' [2]. Student feedback also indicates a sense of having gained critical understanding of what demonstrating mastery in international HRM implies. Not only through 'doing' modular study (Brecher, 2002), but also through accumulating practically informed experience continuously integrated throughout the programme.

END NOTES

[1] The International Personnel and Development module had been validated in anticipation of its underpinning role for the MAIHRM, and had been offered as part of the Business School Postgraduate Scheme one semester in advance of the new MA's formal introduction to the prospectus.

[2] Harmeet Arora, cited in *London Metropolitan University Postgraduate Prospectus*, 2003-04.

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Biographical note

Stephen J Perkins is Programme Leader, MAIHRM and Director, Comparative Organisation Research Centre, London Metropolitan University. In addition to academic and practitioner journal publications, he is author of *Globalization: The People Dimension* and (co-author) the *IPD Guide to International Reward and Recognition*.

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