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Quality Assurance in "Shell Modules" - Negotiated Curriculum and Informing Best Practice (0068)

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Introduction:

Employer engagement is a major theme in current HE policy development. Given impetus by Lambert [1] and Leitch[2], expansion of this work is expected in the coming years.
One way to meet employer demand is to create "shell modules" within a validated award. These are intended to be vehicles which can be populated with specific curriculum content tailored to meet the individual needs of learners and employers.

This raises questions of quality – how can HEIs ensure shell modules are offering 'quality' ? Negotiated curriculum is a relatively new direction for Universities, and is not comprehensively addressed in the QAA Code of Practice [3]. Consequently Institutions must devise QA mechanisms for ensuring academic rigour in their content and assessment. This paper examines one UK University to identify best practice.

- **Methodology:**

In depth interviews were targeted at the strategic level (University Executive) as well as Faculty, Award and Academic Practitioner level, and External Examiner level. From the data, observations on best practice in the QA of negotiated curriculum were drawn, and recommendations offered for academic managers and practitioners.

- **Aim/Impact:**

The impact of this paper is to disseminate best practice for QA of shell modules, and encourage recognition and use of negotiated curriculum as an important means of promoting employer led curriculum.

- **Findings:**

a. Quality Of Learning Opportunities

Students working on shell modules were eligible to use all of the services of the University. While there was limited physical take up from distance learners, every effort was made to facilitate services using technology such as VLE. Interviewees articulated that flexibility of shell modules facilitated their aim to empower students to develop as active, independent learners who recognise and take responsibility for their own learning.

b. Academic Standards

QAA guidelines cover academic standards at national, subject and programme level. However where the curriculum is not specified, as in shell modules, it is not possible to reference subject benchmark statements. The academic framework in this research referenced the QAA generic learning outcomes (LOs) defined at undergraduate and post graduate (levels 4,5,6, 7 and 8).

Shell modules were subject to the same rigorous QA as other University modules. Internal QA processes included Validation, Internal Moderation, Second Marking, Annual Monitoring Reports, Academic Boards and Institutional Audits. External QA included External Examiners, regular reviews and re-validations as well as QAA Audits, however significant differences existed. Since shell module descriptors are written in generic terms, validation cannot assess award LOs in the usual way. This means QA relies heavily on staff delivering the award. The External Examiner noted that he was *"...comfortable with the flexibility given to staff to ensure objectives are delivered..."*

Additional QA processes have been introduced, including a formally approved "Learning Contract", however this occurs at the outset of the award, and is not specific on content.

When questioned regarding award outcomes, the External Examiner expressed the view that when writing the award aims, it is necessary to *"...tread a careful path to make sure they are not too specific. Not to say 'you will learn a particular technical skill'... human skills, personal skills, that's fine..."*

He expressed the view that the interdisciplinary nature of the student work should be encouraged, since it enriched the student experience and the course as a whole. He placed the emphasis for providing flexibility on HEIs:

"The ethos is the world of work, not the world of academe. It is incumbent upon academic institutions to give students an academic framework to learn, but it has to be applicable to the world of work."

c. Student experience:

Due to their highly individualised content, typical delivery of shell modules is on a 121 supervisory basis –much the same as FYPs or dissertations. The award leader noted the need to 'manage' students' expectations.
Student experience relies heavily on their interaction with the supervisor; however academics described this 'partnership' approach as 'complex', noting that some less experienced staff found their role 'outside their comfort zone'. It was suggested staff 'mentoring' and regular course meetings might address this.

- **Conclusions:**

The QA processes for shell modules adhere to the QAA guidelines, and are in many ways identical to QA for traditional modules. However negotiated content has resulted in the introduction of additional QA processes, notably at the Learning Contract stage and as shell modules are populated. Equivalence in credit value and level relies on staff experience and judgement. Award level LOs are articulated at the outset, but due to the 'dynamic' nature of negotiated awards 'holistic' progress of students is difficult to monitor. The inter-disciplinary nature of student work observed was considered reflective of the world of work, and to enrich course value rather than detract from it.

Recommendations:

a. Quality Of Learning Opportunities

- Appropriate technology should be employed to facilitate equivalence of learning opportunities

b. Academic Standards

- Award outcomes should be described in relevant documentation, in terms that allow flexibility for interdisciplinary curriculum.

- Learning Contracts are subject to change, and review processes should exist.
- Award outcomes and Learning contracts should be reviewed as shell modules are populated, with a view to ensuring a coherent programme of study, not necessarily conforming to rigidly specified outcomes.
- Administrative systems need to sufficiently monitor student progress.
- Staff should be confident in negotiating both learning and assessment appropriate to the award.
- Equivalence of credit and level supported through regular meetings.

c. <u>Student experience:</u>

- Incorporate time for additional QA activities finance these appropriately into the provision.
- Adopt a 'team approach' to staffing, to facilitate consistency and sustainability, with the team providing sufficient experience to support the learners'.
- Negotiate 'Service levels' and make explicit.
- Encourage pedagogic development appropriate to supporting negotiated learning.
- Facilitate mentoring of new staff by more experienced team members.
- Schedule meetings with employers (where involved) to monitor the 'perceived value' of the student learning through negotiated modules

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References:

Lambert, R (December 2003) Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration: Final Report
Leitch, S (December 2006) Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills, DIUS (July 2007) World class skills: implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England
Quality assurance and employer engagement in HE learning: Report to the HEFCE/QAA Quality Assurance Task Group by SQW Consulting
QAA Code of Practice – all documents found on www.qaa.co.uk

Cut:

"Shell modules are developed so that context-specific content can be accredited rapidly. The development of shell modules also helps maintain sustainability of provision by widening the potential market."

In the words of the QAA:

"*Such a partnership, whether through formal or informal arrangements, acknowledges that while providers are responsible for providing inclusive learning opportunities and support for learning, the effectiveness with which the learning opportunities are used is a matter for students themselves."*

"We would not expect to see all the shell modules populated at that stage – they are filled in as and when the student will study the modules – that is the way the process works currently."

Other QA processes mirror internal QA for traditional modules – these include internal moderation and 'sign-off' for module proposals and module assessments, as well as second marking.
"*As a supervisor I get my project signed off by another staff member. I prepare a specification and an assessment with the student to meet the LOs. There is an approval process ...This is all very similar to how this University does Final Year Projects..."*

The role of Module Leader also applies to shell module projects:
"As Module Leader for work based projects, I am the QA point where I ensure the projects are at the right level and credit, and they meet the LOs..."

While staff make commendable efforts to ensure the academic rigour of individual modules, there is less control over the award LOs:
"...the external examiner will be checking that the work submitted is meeting the award outcomes at the various levels, and confirming that through the usual EE reports and AMRs.... the award leader should be reflecting on that on an annual basis.."

"The award outcomes are articulated in the documentation... the holistic view is more difficult, of the award it is possible, but a holistic view of where an individual student is at any one time – we need to get that more clearly...."