

Taught master's students' curricular engagement: Inquiring into the 'middle bit' (0077)

Introduction – the comparatively overlooked 'middle bit'

Curriculum and *student* are the key components of the conception of *students' curricular engagement*. From the perspective of *curriculum*, compared with its European, Australian and US counterparts, the UK taught master's programmes retain a competitive edge because of their short, intensive and well-organised features (Kerry and McDermott, 2010, p. 126). However, previous studies have tended to examine the specific programmes rather than investigate the curricula as a whole (Dinwoodie, 2001; McEwen, 2005). From the perspective of *student*, taught master's students have become the largest group of the UK postgraduate cohort (HEPI, 2010) due to a strong surge in their total number in recent years (HESA, 2009). Nevertheless, their learning that occurs in the curricula of the 'middle bit' seems to be comparatively overlooked in academic discussions.

This paper describes a study that seeks to theorise taught master's students' curricular engagement at English universities. It also identifies the areas where efforts could be made to improve this engagement and the future taught master's curriculum design. In this study, students' curricular engagement was initially conceptualised as a pattern structured by students' intellectual inquiry, practical inquiry and emotional inquiry. The three forms of inquiry were assumed to be interrelated. This pattern might also be influenced by some external factors from the curriculum, student and pedagogical dimensions in the taught master's programme learning context, which were labelled as *taught masterness*. These internal and external mechanisms established a preliminary conceptual framework to guide the empirical stage of this study.

Research methods

Fifty-three taught master's students across several disciplines voluntarily participated in this study. They were from a single-subject institute, a top research-intensive university and a vocational oriented university. Data was gathered via course handbooks, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) results in 2010, a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews with students.

In order to answer the two research questions addressed from the preliminary conceptual framework, a mixed-method research design was employed to capture students' perceptions and examine the relevant documents. The survey data was mainly processed through SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The interview transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO for thematic analysis. These two different analyses aimed to test the conceptual framework by summarising and interpreting students' narratives. The content analysis of course documents and PTES results was considered as a supplement to them.

Main Findings

Overall, most students thought that they were highly engaged with their taught master's curricula. In terms of the proportions that the three forms of inquiry occupy within the engagement pattern, intellectual inquiry was ranked top by this group of students, followed by emotional inquiry and practical inquiry. It appears that students' emotional inquiry has become noticeable within their curricular engagement, which might be related to the degree of students' learning self-regulation (Kenyon and Hase, 2010).

In addition, the three forms of inquiry in this engagement pattern have a relatively equal positive interplay, but the interplays between their respective sub-dimensions vary. The demographic features of the fifty-three students had little influence on these correlations. With evidence in the literature (Barnett, 1990, p. 43; Earwaker, 1992, p. 15), I will argue that the formation of master's learner identity might be the common factor that promotes students' engagement with their curricula.

There is also some evidence that in the taught master's programme learning context taught master's curriculum features, students' prior learning experiences and postgraduate pedagogical support from different types of universities have major impacts on this curricular engagement pattern. These impacts from the *taught masterness* are multifaceted, making the inquiry-based pattern constantly changing in reality.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study might not be generalisable to all the taught master's students due to the sample size. However, they provide three points that could be considered as the contributions of this study.

Firstly, the taught master's curricular engagement pattern focuses on student learning. Therefore, it in fact creates a *micro-level* theory in higher educational studies (Sabri, 2009), which could provide useful support to the establishment of the *macro-level* (policy/management) and *meso-level* (research/teaching) theories related to students.

Secondly, this study identifies a missing part in curriculum design - a concern on students' emotional inquiry. It seems significant that this part needs to be displayed in curriculum handbooks, at least, in a section of the session aims. Although there could be some practical barriers such as the difficulty of articulating, in this case, pedagogical communications with students that might be helpful to overcome these barriers.

Thirdly, the findings suggest that the initial motivations, processes and outcomes of students' actual curricular engagement may be inconsistent with the aims and contents of the curricula. Hence, a gap might exist in students' perceptions of curriculum. The *gap* might be a place full of various statuses: alignments, tensions and conflicts. The tensions or conflicts may need to be reduced through proper provision of pre-course propaganda, legitimate formative assessment and post-study guidance which considers students' needs.

References

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