

## **Connecting propositional knowledge to professional practice: what is the future for module specification documents? (0201)**

### ***Introduction and research question***

As a result of changes implemented following the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997) the intended learning outcomes of degree programmes and modules are now published in 'Specification Documents'. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) defines a programme specification document as: '... a concise description of the intended learning outcomes from a higher education programme, and how these outcomes can be achieved and demonstrated' (QAA, 2006). Whilst there is some variety in the composition of such documents, most seek to explain what learners will 'know' by the time they have successfully completed their chosen module(s) and programme(s). However, by completing prescribed modules or programmes, to what extent do learners really come to 'know' what they are informed they will 'know'? Is there a match between the *propositional* knowledge presented in these documents and *actual* knowledge that learners acquire and apply in their professional practice? The purpose of this project is to tap into these issues, by drawing on experiences of participants of a postgraduate teaching development programme. The research questions are as follows:

- To what extent does propositional knowledge that participants are *expected* to gain through a programme of study as depicted in specification documents correlate to that which they feel they *did* gain and enact in their professional practice?
- What do participants use specification documents for?

This proposal was written just after the empirical research for the project was undertaken. Thus, results and conclusions will be further developed prior to the Conference. For purposes of the paper, the term 'programme' is used to denote a programme of study offered in a higher education institution, whilst 'participant' refers to a student or learner.

### ***Theoretical framework***

There are a number of studies which discuss strengths and weaknesses of specification documents, such as Maher (2004) and Entwistle (2005), whilst Knight (2006) argues that learning outcomes expressed in specification documents assume that all knowledge is propositional and explicit. A propositional approach presents knowledge as something which can be imputed or transferred to learners – similar to what Lave & Wenger (1991) referred to as the 'standard paradigm of learning'. Programme and module specification documents tend to assume a propositional view of knowledge, with the effect of promoting a 'commodification of knowledge' (Maher, 2004).

Nevertheless, the undertaking of this project necessitated some perspective of what knowledge 'is', so two knowledge representation frameworks were drawn upon, these being Blackler (1995) and Eraut (2000, 2004). In their different ways, each of these provides an interpretation about how knowledge is developed and may be applied which extends beyond the propositional model. These frameworks will be used as problematising concepts in that they reveal weaknesses in the propositional model. On the basis of applying the two aforementioned frameworks and following the undertaking of nine narrative interviews with participants of a teaching development programme, it is argued that whilst specification documents bestow some valuable functions, they are simplistic in their articulation of and assumptions about knowledge. That is, they fail to provide a complete representation of what learners come to know and enact in their professional practice.

### ***Research context, approach and methods***

The context for the research is a professional development programme for higher education teachers at a UK university, entitled the MA Academic Practice (MAAP). Warren (2008) has discussed the diverse professional roles of participants who undertake such programmes and indeed MAAP participants come from many disciplinary backgrounds and have varied roles. Teaching development programmes have been discussed widely in the literature with studies presenting mixed reports of their value (Knight, 2006; Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2005; Neumann, Parry & Becher, 2002).

Nine narrative style interviews were undertaken with current and former members of the programme. The design of the interview schedule allowed participants the opportunity to present rich narratives of their experiences of the programme with respect to the professional development that was expected as compared with their current practices. Participants were asked about what knowledge they felt they had gained from different modules of the programme, how they used specification documents during their studies, and how they applied knowledge which they gained to their own professional practices.

### ***Results***

As mentioned above, the project presented in this proposal has only just been undertaken, with the data analysis and write up currently *in situ*. Therefore, the remaining sections should be interpreted as preliminary and will be further developed in time for delivery of the paper. The results are being analysed thematically and through linkage back to original specification documents that participants made reference to in the interviews, as well as the frameworks by Blackler (1995) and Eraut (2000).

The findings suggest that specification documents do not provide a complete rendition of the breadth of knowledge that participants gain. The ways in which participants apply knowledge that they gain from the programme is more diverse and varied than suggested in such documents. Participants do find specification documents valuable, but use them for specific, strategic

purposes, such as considering assessment tasks, or applying for accreditation of prior learning (APL) for a module. Perhaps most importantly, the results show numerous instances in which participants gain knowledge of much broader or different 'type' than the propositional approach that tends to characterise the content of such documents suggest.

### ***Preliminary conclusions***

It will be concluded that specification documents offer a rather restricted perspective of knowledge gained by participants of a programme of study, and that therefore their benefits are rather less than claimed. In some cases, learners make use of such documents for strategic purposes, which do not form part of the learning process. Conversely, learners tend to gain broader knowledge types than that depicted in such documents. In conclusion, specification documents do serve as valuable points of information, but are weaker in showing what learners will come to know, such that a reappraisal of their value and purposes would be timely. Consequently, some ideas will be offered for more positive uses of specification documents in future practice.