SFHEA Case Study Exemplar

8.2 Written Case Study Title:	Course Development at SHU

This case study focuses on Faculty support for Course Development, particularly in relation to the approval process at Sheffield Hallam University. Courses at Sheffield Hallam have until recently undergone a process of institutional approval not only at the start of their life, but also on a five yearly basis. The approval process included the submission of a document presenting its rationale, learning outcomes, and approach to learning, teaching, assessment and employability (the 'def doc') and its module descriptors, which were assessed by a panel consisting of colleagues from across the institution and one external. The process was a key period in the development of courses, providing an opportunity for course teams to reflect on their provision, and organise changes to improve student learning. As such, approval provided a moment in which support for course design can make an important difference.

This case study outlines my role in Faculty support for course development, and demonstrates how my professional skills and knowledge about leading and managing programmes in XXXX and XXXX underpin my thinking. My professional knowledge of course development is rooted in my experience of taking part in course redesign as a member of a XXXX teaching team in my early career, and acting as a panel member for internal approval events at XXXX University. My thinking at that time was, I would speculate, typical of a professional academic who is driven more by disciplinary content and organisational management issues than pedagogic evidence. I was concerned to influence the course development team to include the areas of the discipline which I saw as most significant intellectually, and I was focussed on what I saw as new research agendas.

A significant development in my thinking about course design came when took over as Course Leader for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education at XXXX University. Bigg's concept of constructive alignment gave me a tool with which I could critically evaluate provision by focussing on learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks. My think about the purpose of course design was also further by collaborative delivery with XXXX of XXXX University, who introduced the notion of transferability of learning as a key aim of any course. The experience of redesigning the course to align with the new UKPSF provided powerful experiential learning for me. I continued to learn about course redesign as I lead the equivalent course at the University of XXXX.

However, on arrival at SHU, issues with the approval process as a lever for quality enhancement of courses were immediately apparent. The chief orientation of course development support focused on compliance with regulations. The 'hygiene factors' around, for example, numbers of assessment tasks or word counts, seemed to be given an undue emphasis over the quality of constructive alignment and student experience. I should emphasise at this point that many courses were of high quality, but this was despite rather than because of the support they received.

In part the issues with course development support were the result of its operational organisation. The key mechanism for course development support was Faculty sign-off, which took place after a course team had produced their documentation, and immediately before it was sent to the panel, giving little scope for intervention beyond compliance with regulation. Any time for development was hurried and pressured. Moreover, research evidence (Pountney 2014) suggested that documentation for approval was written instrumentally for the purpose of progressing through the panel meeting, rather than to effect change on a course.

My initial approach was to build my professional experience in course approval. I joined a number of approval panels in XXX and XXX to gain an insight into how course teams were developing their provision, and the process they had been through in arriving at their current state of thinking. This experience was invaluable in understanding the factors impacting upon course design on the ground, including staff pedagogic knowledge, the role of the institutional environment, feedback from students, and the organisational constraints on development.

In conjunction with the Faculty Head of Quality, I worked to improve the utility of the period up to approval for course development. The first step was to build longer term support for course design teams. In order to provide course design teams with the confidence to engage in genuine course development, we wrote a Faculty course design handbook which was designed to provide course teams with more confidence in the process, and their ability to use it for genuine reflection and development. I also worked with the Faculty-based members of the Quality and Standards Team to identify courses which were scheduled for an approval event over the academic year. This enabled me to start meeting with course design teams at an early stage in the redesign process. The purpose of this early meeting was twofold. Firstly it aimed clear up at an early stage any concerns over 'hygiene' compliance issues, so that the team could progress with confidence that their structural decision-making was sound. Secondly, it aimed to identify key areas where support could usefully be provided by the Faculty to enable course design teams to draw upon expertise in specific educational areas.

At an operational level, the change to early course design meetings generally worked well. An exception was where courses were engaged in a lengthy business approval conversation with the Faculty PPG, which meant that the time between business approval and the course approval event was truncated. I began to meet with course teams prior to their business approval where necessary. In terms of impact, there were some important benefits. The aim of providing specialist Faculty support for course design was successful. For example, the

XXX team articulated a goal over reviewing their online provision, and I was able to connect them to the Faculty E-Learning Development Team, who in turn provided specialist support which assisted the course design team in generating and implementing new strategic and operational developments to improve their pedagogy. As a further example, I worked with a course team on their design of assessment. Drawing upon the TESTA model of course-based assessment design, we reviewed the experience of assessment and feedback from a student perspective, mapping where feedback could be used by students for their next assessment, with the aim of improving the quality of student learning. Support for employability was another key area of our Faculty provision.

The other aim of the early meetings, of changing the instrumental approach to course design was more patchy in its effects. The wider environment in which course teams were undertaking development was more important than the environment I was creating in the early meetings. What interested me was that there were other factors beyond the scope of the Faculty meeting which impacted upon the course design team's approach. These included factors such as the timescale to approval which had been planned in the Department (courses which had longer before approval were more likely to engage in useful team dialogue); the sense of ownership of course teams in the change process (which was linked to the perceived impact of regulations and strategic change on their ability to make choices); the experience and confidence of staff members; and clear insight into the purpose of the course (amongst others). Notwithstanding these factors, my own experience was that there were a significant number of courses where we had a constructive dialogue about course development.

My reflections on this case study are pertinent to the changing organisational environment for course design. From 2015, existing courses began to make developmental changes via Departmental Boards rather than approval events. Approval events remained for new courses only. I would evaluate the existing course development support as relevant to this latter group. However, existing courses needed to focus on ongoing course development. I would suggest that the trajectory outlined above, which moved from course compliance to course development, provided a good basis, by focussing on the skills and knowledge required by course teams for effective renewal. This highlights the need for course design support to become a set of professional development activities, which enable 'on the job' learning about quality course provision. I would suggest that the bespoke and expert Faculty support which I have developed is one approach which could continue to work. However, there are other professional development methods which could prove useful, not least a culture and ethos of sharing professional learning between different contexts through an informal scholarship of teaching and learning, in which course designers are willing to share lessons from course design with others.

Dimensions of Practice: A1-5, K2, K3, K6, V3, V4

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