NEGOTIATING QUALITY IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT – A PROCESS OF FINDING A COMPROMISE FOR DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDER AGENDAS

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Abstract

The research article reports on curriculum quality for an ODL setting in the context of a digital era, from a perspective of a broader educational stakeholder environment. The literature research paper ask the question with regards to divergent, dynamic and sometimes conflicting perspectives and agendas of different stakeholders in the broader education spectrum in an ODL setting. The research paper establishes a thought pattern in searching for the best answer or a compromise with regard to stakeholder agendas by illustrating and engaging in an applicable thought pattern on how evaluation and adjustment operate in an ODL curriculum model. The article asks and addresses specific issues about what is so special about ODL and therefore the value of stakeholder agenda and perspectives in curriculum development. The article assumes that there is a natural sequence in which to work in curriculum development and therefore identifies the research questions that has not been addressed sufficiently in literature with regard to the inter-connectedness and alignment of the components of curriculum development. Going through this analysis, the research will allude to the stakeholder agendas and therefore address the specific areas of compromise in curriculum development. The research adopts a qualitative case study research method.

Keywords: DE, Stakeholder, Curriculum, interconnect, agenda

Introduction

At the outset of this research, the literature on the quality of curriculum development seemed well defined and sufficiently narrow in scope. However, a detailed research on the topic revealed that this was hardly the case. The problem is attributed, in part, to the interdisciplinary nature of the research topic and the uniqueness of ODL pedagogy in a digital era. Numerous research output have been reported in the literatures journals of

education, each looking at the perspective of the stakeholders and their different and often divergent definitions of quality.

The aim of the research paper is to present a scheme that can be used to satisfy the research question, whether are the areas of consensus and mutual agreement or compromise for stakeholders divergent, and different perspectives and agendas in the curriculum development process?. The established scheme is a representation and an illustration of how various components and element of curriculum development interrelate. A clear description of how these elements influence each other is also presented. Therefore the research output can be used as a thought process to establish consensus among different and divergent stakeholder perspectives, interests and agendas, and enable a satisfaction of all stakeholder and their mandate.

The point of departure was the exploration of published research on curriculum development and design. Various concepts that underpin different perspectives on curriculum development are discussed. The role of ODL in developing a curriculum is discussed and a set of key concepts for curriculum development is established from literature. The key concepts are used as a basis for evaluating perceptions and agendas of different stakeholders on curriculum development and design. The resultant of this process is the identification of the key components of curriculum development and the relationship between them.

The research will then bring in the interrelationship idea between the key concept of the curriculum development and design, and map a link between the key curriculum development concepts, thereby, introducing areas of common interest between the key curriculum development concepts. These areas of common interest are the manifestation of common ground, mutual understanding and consensus for stakeholder's different mandates, agendas and perspectives.

Methodology

Qualitative case study methodology affords researchers opportunities to explore and explain a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This approach ensures that the phenomenon under study is explored through a variety of lenses which allows an in-depth understanding and allows multi facets of the case under study to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case study approach aligns to the goals of this research in that the focus of the study is to explore and explain "how" (curriculum development for ODL in a digital era) and it covers the contextual conditions in which the phenomenon under study occurs.

The unit of analyses (case) in this study is a focused literature review on curriculum development for ODL in a digital era. The attributes of this research satisfy the definition of a case as stipulated by Miles and Huberman (1994) and they are in line with Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) stipulations concerning setting boundaries for cases in a case study research approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The research also appeals to boundaries stipulated by Creswell (2003), those of time and place (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In line with the boundaries of the definition and context, and the research question (i.e. whether are the areas of consensus and mutual agreement or compromise for stakeholders divergent, and different perspectives and agendas in the curriculum development process?), the type of case study this research adopts aligns with explanatory and exploratory or descriptive case study as categorized by Yin (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This research will lead to a development of solutions or recommendation that will address the following propositions/ issues regarding to divergent, dynamic and sometimes conflicting perspectives and agendas of different stakeholders in the broader education spectrum of an ODL setting. Propositions and/or issues are necessary elements in a case study research in that both lead or precede the development of a conceptual framework that guides the research (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Discussion

Totte et al., (2012), postulates that the term curriculum can mean different things to different groups, when used within the context of higher education. These authors state that sometimes the curriculum is reduced to the structure and content within one course, this paper adopts the description of course and program that is described by Biggs and Tang (2011). Therefore the focus in this paper is on the aspects of curriculum development that goes beyond course design, as is stipulated in Totte et al. (2012). In this paper, as is in Totte et al. (2012), curriculum and program are in fact synonyms.

The research declares that curriculum development is influenced by different stakeholder agendas and perspectives therefore it is not a static description, as noted in Totte et al. (2012). On the contrary, it is a dynamic conceptualization process that cannot be grasped within a single snapshot (Totte et al., 2012). Therefore, because curriculum development process develops continuously due to environmental demands and contextual changes (Totte et al., 2012), to comprehend and illustrate the area of compromise for different and sometimes conflicting agendas of stakeholders, curriculum development is approached from different points of view.

When thinking of curriculum development we should think more widely and consider not only what should be taught and why, but also how it should be taught and how the teaching

and learning process itself will be implemented. The latter part on the preceding statement refers to the application of a management cycle in the curriculum development implementation phase. The management cycle will illustrate the different phases of curriculum development implementation and the role played by specific stakeholders.

The discussion that follows identifies the key phases of curriculum development management cycle and the various levels of stakeholder engagement. There-by, introducing the concept of establishing areas on compromise, alignment and interconnectivity between stakeholder agendas and perspectives, at different levels.

The management cycle has four distinct phases, in which various stakeholder agendas and perspectives are engaged (CHE, 2014). The first phase is the Pre-planning phase in which engagement with the outside world into which the curriculum will be launched manifest (as seen in Figure 1 – economic/ policy level). Only if it is feasible in the light of this level of stakeholder engagement, should curriculum development go ahead.
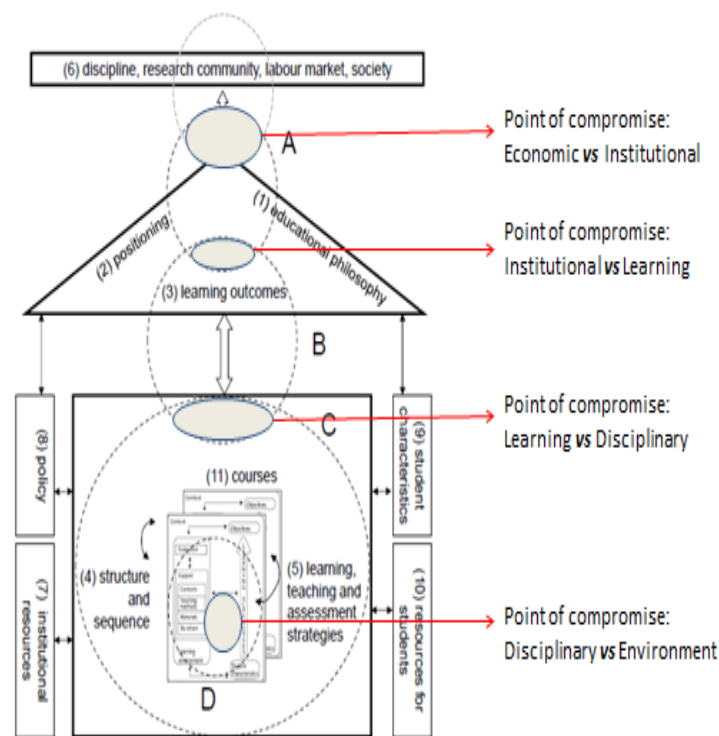

Figure 1. Levels of stakeholder engagement (Source: Moll, 2004)

Figure 2 below gives a summary of stakeholders involved at this level, and these are accreditation bodies, national, state/provincial policy custodians, the research context and the target qualifications. Perceptions of role players at this level influence the curriculum development process and a compromise is needed with the second level of role players, that is, the institutional level role players. Stakeholders interconnectedness and interests in curriculum development may be different but with a common goal of developing an all-

inclusive curriculum. Therefore a level of mutual agreement is indispensable and a compromise must be reached. The literature review research seeks to highlight the level of compromise required and issues that pertain to this mutual agreement. This is a point of mutual agreement between the two levels (i.e. economic/ policy level and institutional/ cultural level), where considerations of both are included in what should be the expected graduate or exit level competencies of the programs offered.
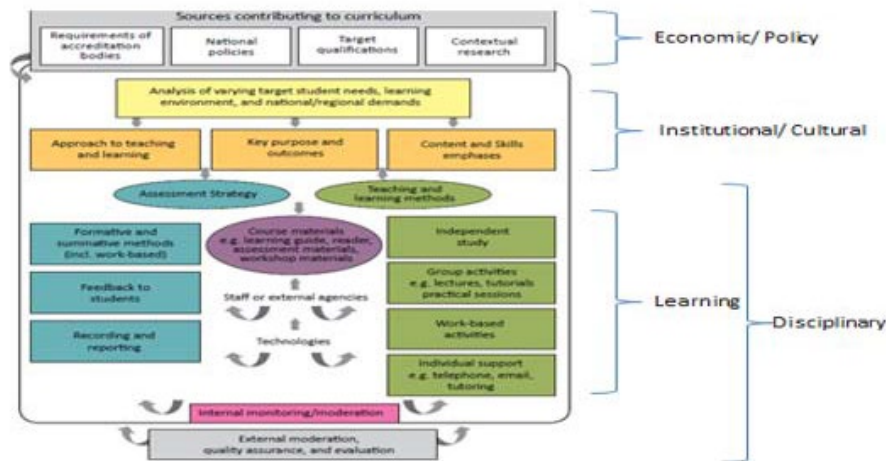

Figure.2: Curriculum design for distance education (Source: CHE, 2014)

Figure 2. Curriculum design for distance education (Source: CHE, 2014)

Second is the planning and development phase in which two steps are taken in the curriculum development process. First is the engagement of stakeholders internal to an academic institution, that is, the institutional/ cultural stakeholder consultation process. This level of engagement is characterized by a good deal of consultation between the academic and service departments such as media, printing, ICT and student support (CHE, 2014).

The main purpose of the consultation is to deliberate on the technical possibilities and the implications of curriculum intentions for an ODL setting in digital era (Lentell, 2007). The outcome of the deliberations will be put together into a development blueprint, which will be circulated through appropriate approval processes internal in the institution (CHE, 2014). Once the approval has been gained, the second step is engaged, in which the design and development of learning resources is the goal. At this point of institutional stakeholder consultation, a compromise is needed between the economic/policy level stakeholders above the institutional level and the learning material design and development stakeholders below, as depicted in Figure 2 above.

The design and development of learning resources activity is the most complex and expensive, level of stakeholder engagement, in the curriculum development management

cycle. At this level of engagement various stakeholders may have different agendas and sometimes conflicting perspectives and interests but the goal of all involved is to ascertain that the curriculum is turned into reality (CHE, 2014).

Stakeholder engagement at the level of learning material design and development include perspectives and interest of writers, developers, course teams, discipline experts, editors, instructional and VLE designers, media producers, testing agents, and moderators. These stakeholders need to negotiate a point of compromise with the institutional/cultural level stakeholder interests and the discipline specific stakeholder agendas, as depicted in Figure 2 above.

Last is the production, delivery and evaluation step in the curriculum development management cycle. In this final step, materials need to be produces based on the latest enrolment numbers and audio-visuals and digital materials are produced in their final form. It is only in the delivery and evaluation stage that the course is ready to presented to students (CHE, 2014), thereby tutorial and student support become the main players at this level of curriculum development process. This is at the discipline specific level of stakeholder engagement and the role players are students, faculty and support services. A point compromise envisaged is between the Learning material stakeholder perspective and the discipline specific stakeholder agendas and perspective.
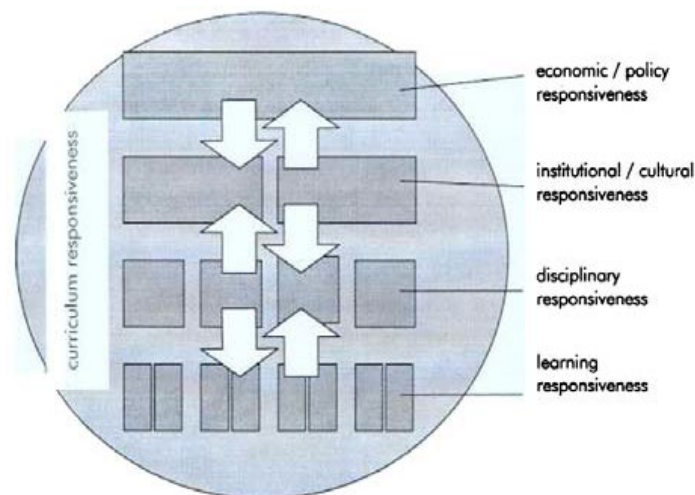

Figure 3. Illustration of stakeholder interconnenctedness in curriculum development (adapted Conceptual scheme for curriculum development) (Source: Totte et al., 2012)

Figure 3 is the same illustration of curriculum development as Figure 2, although Figure 3 is from a perspective of stakeholder interconnectedness. Therefore Figure 3 gives a better understanding of the different agendas and perspectives of different stakeholder communities at different levels and stages of curriculum development. So far the literature

review research has made apparent that all stakeholders are influencing (and influenced by) the choices institutions make in defining their planned curriculum (Totte et al., 2012).

To comprehend the complexity of working on curriculum development related issues, four points of compromise are proposed (A, B, C, D), which are closely interconnected. Navigating through all components connected by a circle enables a clear comprehension of the interlace formed by the respective components and their alignment. Comprehending the connectedness created between all components connected by a circle makes it apparent that changing one of the components will influence the other connected components (Totte et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Curriculum development for ODL in a digital era is influenced by different stakeholders with varying and sometimes conflicting perspectives and agendas. Although stakeholder agendas are different, one common goal for all stakeholders is to produce an all-inclusive curriculum that is reflective of stakeholder's interests and aspiration. The outlined hierarchy in stakeholder interaction and the resultants points of compromise does not preclude the existence of an integrated and random interaction between stakeholders.

Stakeholder interconnectedness is not as per levels illustrated in Figure 3 but, the negotiation is guided by the need for mutual agreement on salient points of curriculum development and design. This means there is no prohibition for stakeholders at the economic level to interact with stakeholders at the discipline specific level, for the guiding principle is the need for compromise and a mutual benefit agreement on issues that are a concern for both stakeholder communities, in the curriculum development process.

The hierarchy depicted in Figure 3 is an illustration of generic points of compromise available due to stakeholder interconnectedness. It is also a guide to curriculum development stakeholders to note the three guiding principles in stakeholder consultation for curriculum development and design. The guiding principles are as follows:

- First, there is a need to establish a curriculum design that models good teaching and enables students to develop the necessary competencies (as stipulated by stakeholders), regardless of the mode of provision (CHE, 2014).
- Second, curriculum development must model the desired approaches to knowledge, students and technology usage and reflect a commitment to equivalence of experience to stakeholders concern, irrespective of the distance context (CHE, 2014).

- Third, suitable technologies must be used in ways most appropriate to the learning intention, as stipulated in curriculum development, taking into cognizance the technology profile of stakeholders, such as students and their educators, and the context of practice (CHE, 2014).

Therefore an area for negotiating stakeholder's divergent and sometimes conflicting agendas is critical in the process of searching for the answer or compromise, as highlighted by this focused literature review on curriculum development for ODL in a digital era.

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