

CURRICULUM REVIEW: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract:

Currently, education is facing overwhelming challenges in terms of the generation of students that the universities are taking in and the demands of the industry. This is propagated further by the enhancement of modern technology. Therefore, the courses offered in universities must ensure that graduates are ready for the working world and a good well rounded curriculum is needed to achieve this. In Malaysia, the body governing academic quality is the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and they require curriculums to be reviewed every 3 – 5 years to ensure their relevance to industry requirements. A curriculum usually undergoes years of ‘trials’ and changes before a sound one can be produced. In essence, a curriculum needs to be reviewed for the following reasons; the dynamic nature of a curriculum, to keep abreast with new approaches in learning and teaching and best practices in teaching strategies. Students need to be trained and well-exposed to meet the challenges of the globalised world and function well at the workplace. Due to these reasons, the paper discusses the processes involved in reviewing a curriculum. A program from the Academy of Language Studies in UiTM Malaysia was selected as a case to highlight the stages, challenges and outcomes of the review.

Keywords: curriculum review, Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), best practices, globalized world

INTRODUCTION

In an industry driven economy like Malaysia, requirements for undergraduate programs are designed to produce quality graduates to meet the industry needs. Some of the requirements include the number and variety of courses offered and the academic experiences they undergo in the duration of their studies. In today’s challenging environment, it is no longer sufficient to equip students with classroom learning but also to provide industry experience to make them more marketable. Currently, the success of programs offered at higher education institutions in Malaysia is measured by the employability rate of its graduates within six months of graduation. Therefore, a sound curriculum is important in ensuring the graduates produced meet the expectations of the employers.

Curriculum is a fundamental matter for the “well-being and effectiveness of higher education” (Barnet & Coate, 2005, p. 7). Without a sound curriculum, a program offered may fail to meet the needs of the stakeholders in-

volved. These include students, parents, sponsors and employers, to name a few. Curriculum is defined by Doll (1996) as "... the formal and informal content and process by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills, and alter attitudes, appreciations, and values under the auspices of" (p. 15) the institution. Alade (2005) defines curriculum as a programme of education prepared for a definite group of learners within a time frame in order to achieve the intended behavioural outcomes. These definitions show what curriculum entails and how the learners are affected in the process.

Curriculum review is now an expected continuous quality improvement initiative by every public higher education institution in Malaysia. This is clearly outlined in the MQA (Malaysian Qualifications Agency) Framework whereby curriculums must undergo a review within 3-5 years in order to remain relevant to the current and future workplace requirements. Alade (2006) states that curriculum review can take many forms – it may be a routine review of existing curriculum in which the focus is on its continual relevance and practicality or it is a review of the curriculum in response to a need as requested for by the stakeholders of education. It is undeniable that curriculum review has many benefits to the stakeholders involved. In guidelines for a review of the curriculum by Instructional Development Units of Cave Hill, Mona, St. Augustine (October 2007 updated February 2008) some of the benefits of a review of the curriculum include:

- (i) More relevant curricula/ program offerings
- (ii) Better performing students
- (iii) Better prepared graduates
- (iv) Improved graduate satisfaction
- (v) Improved employer satisfaction
- (vi) Improved relationships between students and teaching staff
- (vii) Greater staff satisfaction with student progress
- (viii) An educational institution that is more responsive to the needs of its various publics

Even with the many benefits of a curriculum review as listed above, it is not an easy task to make changes to the curriculum. It needs to go through a process to achieve the desired outcomes with many challenges along the way. In order to review the existing curriculum, feedback from stakeholders that include present and former students, employers and captain of industries is an integral part of the process to gauge their expectations of the graduates.

With the increasing demand of quality graduates, it is inevitable that an evaluation of the programme be carried out. Changes taking place rapidly, against a backdrop of the shift from industrial economy to one based on the instantaneous, global traffic of information

– explosive knowledge economy – demand for outcomes over process (Jorgenson, 2006).

Thus in looking into the program, courses offered are the focus of curriculum reviewers because these courses are the ones which mould future graduates in terms of the input they get during the course of the program. A curriculum review is therefore necessary to improve the quality of input of knowledge for students.

Achieving effective curriculum revision requires a thorough understanding of the processes and principles of the

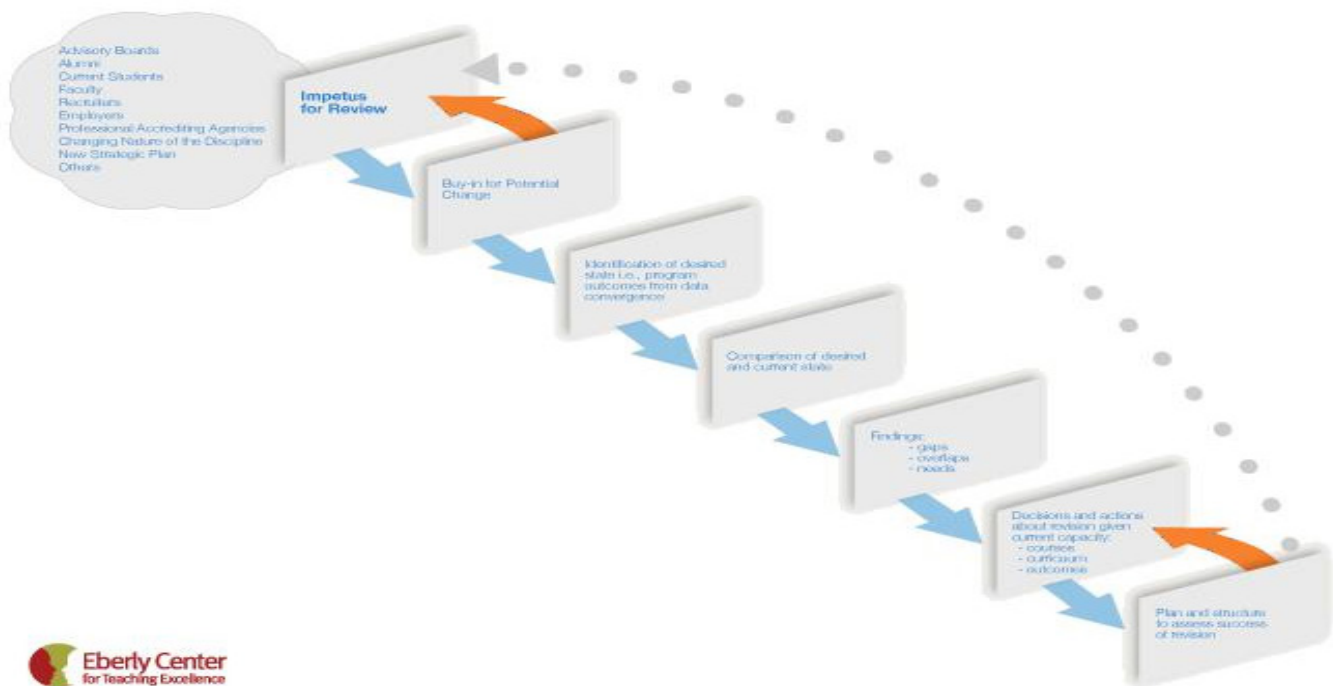
changing paradigms affecting curriculum development (Johnson, J.A.-http://www.education.uiowa.edu/archives/jrel/fall01/Johnson_0101.htm). In other words, before a curriculum is reviewed, it is pertinent that curriculum designers and reviewers understand the courses offered in the program. This is to enable review-ers to look into the strengths and weaknesses of the existing program to enhance and upgrade the curriculum to meet present global development and progress in the field of education.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to describe the stages involved in a curriculum review process conducted for the English for Professional Communication program at Academy of Language Studies (ALS), UiTM Malaysia. However, it is not the intention of the paper to delve into theories related to curriculum review. There are many models on the curriculum review process proposed by various researchers but for the purpose of this study, two of these models were used as reference. Experiences have shown that curriculum review is unique to each educational setting and no particular model fits in nicely with a given context. Two models were found to be useful in guiding the curriculum review team in their task.

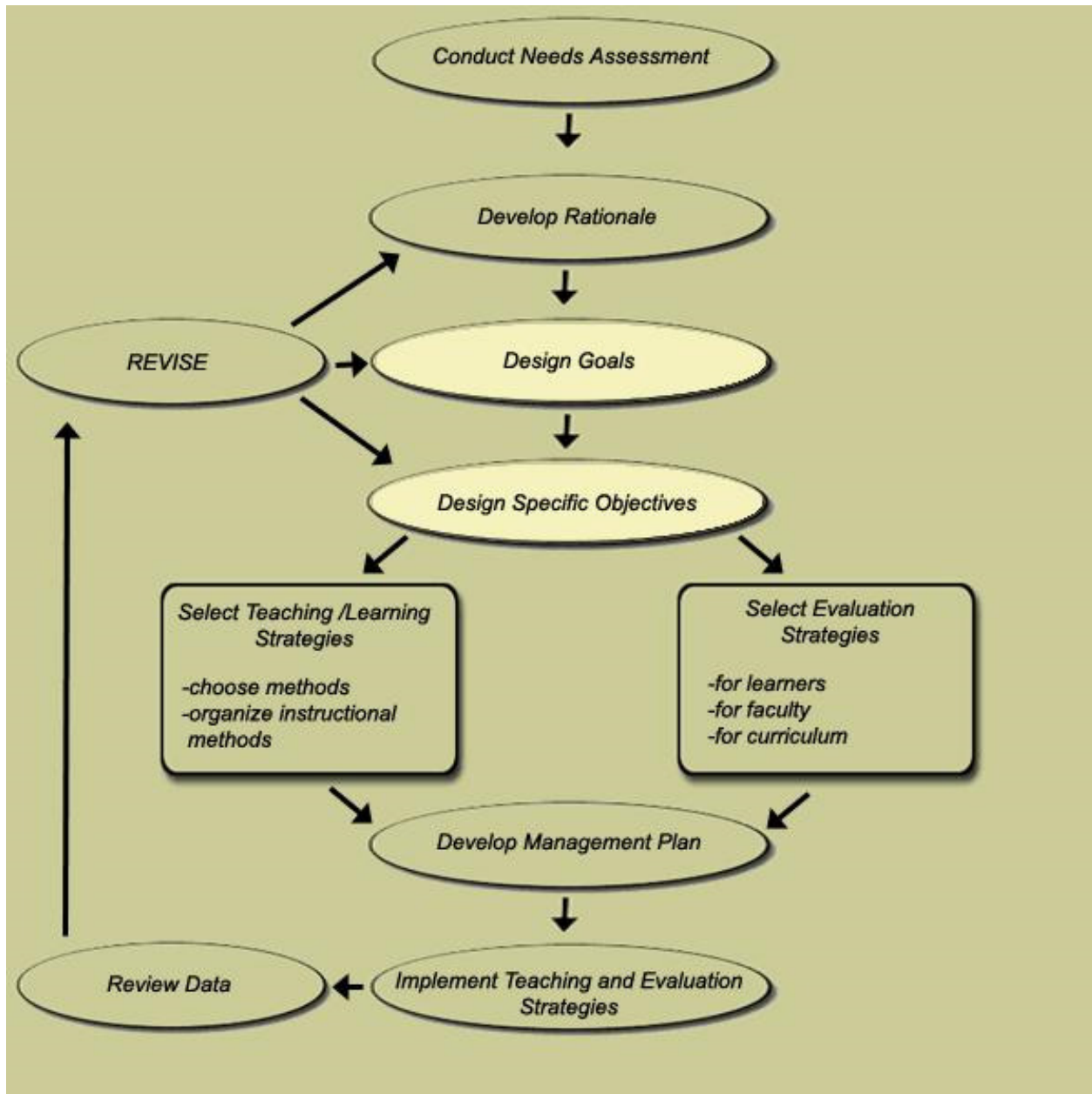
Model 1 shows the steps involved in a curriculum review and revision process developed by the Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University, U.S. This framework shows that the process is not static, and it follows a particular sequence and is dynamic in nature.

Model 1



<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching//resources/CurriculumReviewRevision/index.html> Model 2 shows the steps involved in a curriculum design process developed by Duke University, U.S. In this design, curriculum is developed through a rigorous process, followed by a pilot or a trial of the 'new' curriculum and then it is reviewed.

Model 2



<http://cfmmodules.mc.duke.edu/Curriculum/needs/information.html>

CURRICULUM PROCESS AND DESIGN

This section discusses the curriculum review process involved in an undergraduate program in English for Professional Communication (EPC) at ALS, UiTM. The EPC program structure emphasizes language and communication, linguistics, critical thinking, cross-cultural interaction, management, entrepreneurship, interactive multimedia design and development and organizational behavior. EPC is a three-year program which was first offered in 2006 and to date has produced more than 6 cohorts of graduates. The current curriculum has been in place for six years and thus it is timely that a review is conducted. Based on the employability re-port of these graduates, the curriculum review is necessary to improve the marketability rate of the graduates and to match the current and future needs of the industry.

Curriculum review process of EPC

A systematic process of reviewing a curriculum would provide the curriculum review committee a clear direction in terms of organizing the work that would be involved. Thus a curriculum review team was appointed and it was the responsibility of the team members to carry out the curriculum review within the time stipulated by the management. The team was still in the midst of reviewing the curriculum at the time the paper was written. The curriculum review team met, planned and agreed on the review process which includes stages and work flow of the review process.

Based on the current curriculum, amendments and suggestions were proposed. These changes, amendments and improvements were made based on the needs analysis carried out on the students, lecturers and stakeholders. The questionnaires were distributed to EPC lecturers and students. A market survey was designed for stakeholders to obtain their feedback on the EPC program. The program external examiner's valuable insights and report was also obtained. The feedback received from the stakeholders form the basis of the curriculum review.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Credit hours

- Total number of credit hours for EPC program

After examining the total number of credit hours i.e. 120 credit hours, the team agreed to retain the total number of credit hours for the program. This is to avoid burdening the students since the minimum requirement by MQA for a student to be able to graduate is 120 credit hours. However, this would depend on the number of electives being offered and which electives were selected by students. Currently the students are offered elective courses from the Faculty of Business Management and more options would be made available to them later on.

- Number of credit hours per semester and distribution of courses

The maximum number of credit hours per semester is 23 and it should not exceed the number. Thus it is important for the reviewers to ensure that any new course added in any semester should not exceed 23 credit hours. The curriculum team had managed to distribute the courses based on the university guideline as stipulated by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia: 18 – 20% compulsory university courses, 50 – 60% faculty and program courses and 25 – 30% electives. At present, the total number of faculty and program courses is 21 which made up 62.5% of the whole EPC program and this has exceeded the 50 – 60% range of the total program. The team proposed to reduce the number of program courses to 11 from 14 which brought to a total of 18 courses (faculty and program courses) and brought to a percentage of 56.2% which is within the guideline.

Content of the courses offered

A two-day workshop was conducted to look into the content of the courses offered.

Each Resource Person (RP) reviewed the course content in terms of:

- Electives

The feedback from students indicated that they were satisfied with most of the content of the courses as they stated that the courses have helped develop their knowledge and skills. However, they suggested minor/electives from the Business and Management Faculty to be dropped and replaced by electives from other faculties such as Mass Communication and Tourism. The curriculum team then proposed electives from the faculty of Tourism, Mass Communication and Education to be offered and verbal and written agreements were obtained from the respective faculties. The faculties listed the electives which could be offered with the documents necessary to facilitate the team in the selection of elective courses. The curriculum team looked into the course information (from the list sent by the faculty) to select the courses appropriate to be

offered as electives. Once it was agreed the courses were tabled into the study plan. In terms of relevance of the electives by the Business and Management Faculty, the feedback obtained from organizations which utilized the students' knowledge in business responded favorably toward the business courses offered as electives presently.

- Semester 6 (course load)

The students felt that the final semester was too heavy in terms of the work load. They claimed that they had insufficient time to work on the report (EPC615), while doing their internship and come back to the faculty for another code (EPC690). They felt it was very stressful and too cramped. The team proposed that a few topics of the Professional Presentation (EPC690) be embedded in the practical training course (EPC610) and academic project (EPC615) course. The students would be required to present their academic project once they have come back from their internship. The presentation for the academic project would be included in the EPC615 assessment and the presentation on their workplace portfolio would be in the EPC610 (internship) course.

- Overlapping of content covered

Feedback from lecturers indicated that there was a need to merge a few courses since there was a lot of overlapping in terms of the content covered. From the feedback, five courses were found to have contents which overlapped. For example, some of topics covered in one code may also be covered in another. The only difference is on the depth and the emphasis of the topics. The curriculum review team requested the RPs to meet and agree on the topics being covered in their respective codes.

- Distribution of the skills in the courses offered in the EPC program

The curriculum review team also discussed on the emphasis of the four language skills in the courses offered in the program. The suggestions were made based on a discussion on 1 February 2012. It was agreed that the speaking skills should be within the range of 10%– 30% to ensure that there was a balance in terms of the skills in the courses offered. The percentage indicated in the speaking (SP) column is the suggested percentage for the respective courses. Thus the RPs were requested to make the necessary adjustments in their codes.

Assessment

The feedback from students indicated that there were too many assessments in the courses in EPC. Similar feedback was also given by the external examiner which commented that the students were over tested. It was also indicated the distribution of the due dates of the assessment was cramped and assignments seemed to be due at the same time within the same week. After mapping out all the assessments, it was discovered that there was a pattern in the distribution of assessment. For example, the assessments for almost all parts (semester 1 through 5) were

heavier in week 4, 12 and week 14 of the semester. The curriculum team proposed that the assessment be reduced to 4 assessments for each course (including the final exam) and the RPs to work together and distribute the due dates of assignments. The RPs were to look into the weightage of each assessment as well. The curriculum team also looked into the time spent for each assessment, the type of assessment i.e. quiz, test, final exam – and also when the assessments were carried out. After reviewing the present assessments, the RPs agreed to make some changes and improvement on distribution of the weightage of the assessment.

Plan of Study

Four plans of studies were drawn up for a cohort taking different electives because it would involve different study plan i.e. Business and Management, Mass Communication, Tourism and Education. This is a long process and required many meet-ings because it involved calculation of faculty core, program core and electives in which the percentage of these courses has to be within the university requirement. Most codes also needed to be changed because of the parameter set by the university. This discussion in-volved the Head of Programme (HOP) and the Assistant Registrar of Academic who is well versed with the right codes to be used.

Submission of documents

The RPs for the respective courses were required to submit the course and OBE (outcome based education) documents to the HOP to be submitted to the Academic Affairs Division (AAD) of the university. Meetings and workshops were organized to put together the documents in a systematic manner. AAD were referred to for clarifications and confirmation throughout the process. This stage was a laborious task since it seemed at times there were always new forms or new formats that the RPs had to adjust and make corrections. In the process of preparing the documents, the RPs had to be up-to-date in AAD requirement and guidelines.

CHALLENGES

As expected, the curriculum review effort faced many challenges in every step of the review process. One of the challenges was finding a common time for the curriculum review team to meet. Since the team members were also ALS lecturers, it was difficult to arrange for a suitable time to meet due to their busy schedule. Although many of the meetings were conducted during office hours, a few had to be conducted during weekends and this posed a problem in terms of participation. As a result, deadlines had to be changed due to incompleteness of assigned tasks of some team members.

Another problem was some of the RPs' resistance to change. As discussed in the findings, the RPs had to make many changes to the syllabus and some were reluctant to do so. They felt that their codes were already strong and solid and there was no need for any changes or improvement. The Dean and Head of Program had to convince them that changes to the curriculum were necessary for the betterment of the program.

A major challenge was in terms of the time line for the completion of the curriculum review process. The team members had given their commitment and worked very hard to complete the review on time but due to the extensiveness of the review, it had taken longer than expected. The comprehensive review involved all aspects of the curriculum: content, credit hours and choice of electives. In addition, new requirements imposed by AAD such as new format in the OBE documents had to be addressed in the new curriculum. Thus the time line had to be revised to cater to the new development.

Even with its many challenges, the curriculum review had been a worthwhile effort. The feedback received from the stakeholders had been helpful in deciding on areas of improvement in the existing curriculum. More importantly, the collaborative effort of the EPC curriculum review team members had been invaluable in the curriculum review process.

OUT COMES OF THE REVIEW

When the paper was written, the curriculum review team was still in the midst of finalizing the documents to be submitted to AAD. The comprehensive curriculum re-view of the EPC program had produced a number of important outcomes that include:

- i) four plans of studies for students to choose from i.e. with electives from Mass Communication, Education, Business and Management and Tourism faculties,
- ii) the curriculum review members were more aware of requirements and guidelines of AAD, MQA and the Ministry of Higher Education,
- iii) everyone involved in the review was more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each course and the program as a whole and,
- iv) a continuous curriculum improvement that is based on feedback is important.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, curriculum review is a tedious process that requires many careful considerations. It is clear from the study that any curriculum review process involves several stages of feedback, goal attainment, implementation and revisions. It is an on-going process of continuous improvement and remains dynamic until another review is needed. However, in this study we discovered that the process is also dependent on the given context and situation: there are variables which can influence the direction that the process takes and it becomes unique to the needs of the institution.

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