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ABSTRACT

A Further Education Unit project mapped the current situation in relation to curriculum management in British further education (FE) colleges, especially in the context of incorporation. Most colleges were able to provide useful working definitions of the term "curriculum" that moved beyond the narrow notion of syllabus or teaching content. Colleges identified two key issues as currently driving or leading the development of curriculum policy: college mission and funding. All colleges tended to identify responsibility for curriculum management at three main levels--strategic or senior manager level, middle or functional manager level, and operational or delivery level. A number of colleges had well-developed course monitoring, review, and evaluation systems. Most colleges suggested that resourcing curriculum management was achieved mainly through the designation of specific posts. All had undergone at least one major reorganization in the last 5 years; five colleges had undergone at least two. Key issues were terminology, academic board, training and development, goal setting and targets, devolving curriculum management, and incorporation. The following concerns were to be addressed by colleges: a holistic view, curriculum processes, organizational structure, staff responsibilities, involving and motivating staff, and human resource management. (YLB)

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February 1994

THE REALITIES OF CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT

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FOREWORD

Following the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992, further education (FE) colleges urgently needed to respond to the external requirement of being independent and corporate institutions. They had about 18 months lead-in time to achieve incorporated status. It is possible that in the race to address issues relating to finance, personnel and college assets, curriculum management was relegated in importance. This seemed particularly possible during the latter months of 1992 and into 1993, with a spurt of advertisements in the national press seeking to recruit senior managers, often at unusually high salary levels , in the areas of finance, accountancy, and personnel. Conversely, there was an apparent absence of similar posts relating to the management of the curriculum.

FEU's previous work in this area was evident in the 1988 publications *Coping with Crisis: Management Development in FHE* and *The Reality of College Management*. It therefore appeared timely to 'map' what was currently happening in relation to curriculum management in FE colleges, especially in the context of incorporation.

INTRODUCTION

This bulletin summarises the findings of the FEU project **Managing the Curriculum in Incorporated Colleges** (RP764) which aimed to:

- identify what strategies, processes and organisational structures colleges were utilising for managing the curriculum;
- investigate changes in the roles and responsibilities of curriculum managers;
- provide an insight into the realities of curriculum management based upon the perceptions and day-to-day experiences of practising curriculum managers.

The project was undertaken during a relatively short period around the watershed date of 1 April 1993. It therefore records a view of curriculum management at a time of unprecedented change.

This bulletin will be of interest to:

- curriculum managers at all levels of FE;
- human resource development managers, personnel managers and staff development officers with a responsibility for designating, developing and supporting curriculum management roles within their own institutions;
- senior managers and college governors who are considering institutional re-structuring or realignment.

SUMMARY

At the beginning of this work there was some concern that management of the curriculum was being pushed aside as a result of the pressures of incorporation. In fact, while incorporation has made considerable demands on FE colleges, the curriculum itself has also changed, necessitating corresponding curriculum-led changes in college infrastructure. Incorporation appears to have accelerated existing trends, so that curriculum management now shares centre stage with other management tasks such as finance and personnel.

What is understood by the term curriculum management (or, to be more precise, the processes assumed to be underpinning it) varies considerably both within and between colleges. Evidence suggests that it is the management of the curriculum implementation process that is critical and that this is the aspect that is most often neglected. Although colleges have clarified curriculum policies and priorities, they have sometimes been less successful in developing comprehensive strategies for implementing and embedding such policies.

The increasing diversity and complexity of the 'FE curriculum' have resulted in the development of equally diverse and complex management structures. It is no longer a straightforward matter to define or categorise curriculum management posts according to job title, grade of post or level of responsibility. Although cross-college curriculum management posts continue to increase , they are often now being located at a more senior level in college hierarchies than before.

THE FINDINGS : PHASE 1 PROCESSES AND FRAMEWORKS

Curriculum policy and development

Most of the colleges were able to provide useful working definitions of the term 'curriculum' which moved beyond the narrow notion of syllabus or teaching content, e.g.

> *'The curriculum in essence is all those processes which facilitate learning'*

> *'The range of learning opportunities provided by the college, and the diverse and flexible methods of delivery which aim to widen and increase access'*

> *'The curriculum is the full range of student experience from the moment of entry to the college through to exit and aftercare services'*

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Although only one of the colleges surveyed had a single, over-arching curriculum policy statement, many felt that their college mission statement, or the curriculum section of their strategic plan, fulfilled this function. One college suggested it would be useful to establish such a policy given the broad range of their existing policy statements. Other more specific policy statements affecting the curriculum were evident across all colleges, the most common being:

- equal opportunities (13 colleges)
- entitlement policy (9 colleges)
- records of achievement (7 colleges)
- student support (7 colleges)
- TVEI (5 colleges)
- core skills (5 colleges)

Over half of the colleges suggested that their local education authority (LEA) had been a significant influence on the development of policy statements . To illustrate this, they referred to various LEA working groups and LEA-funded curriculum initiatives, particularly the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and its underpinning strands such as individual action planning, records of achievement and equal opportunities. However, despite this, colleges did not appear to be very concerned about the absence of LEA influence post incorporation and how this might affect future policy development in relation to the curriculum. The two key issues identified by colleges as currently driving or leading the development of curriculum policy were:

- college mission
- funding

Other influences were:

- consumer demand
- market position
- government policy

Curriculum management and implementation

All colleges tended to identify responsibility for curriculum management at three main levels — the strategic or senior manager level, the middle or functional manager level and the operational or delivery level. There has also been an extensive increase of cross-college and curriculum support posts over the last few years. These posts were evident at delivery as well as middle management level and tended to support the implementation or co-ordination of specific curriculum initiatives such as accreditation of prior learning (APL), open or flexible learning, GNVQs, records of achievement and student services.

As well as cross-college posts, a wide range of in-house cross-college teams, working groups and committees had been established alongside more informal mechanisms for curriculum management. For example, a number of the colleges timetabled a common weekly meeting slot for all staff in which they could attend *ad-hoc* curriculum meetings and working groups. One college suggested that the circulation of a staff bulletin provided a useful mechanism for curriculum management.

Curriculum monitoring and evaluation

Curriculum quality and evaluation were high on most college agendas. A number of colleges had well-developed course monitoring, review and evaluation (MRE) systems with some colleges just starting to a develop a comprehensive cross-college system. Such systems tended to be based aroundspecific courses or programme areas. The processes of curriculum monitoring and evaluation tended to be broken down into specific parts with only a tenuous link to key policy statements, e.g. the link between MRE procedures and student entitlement or learner support services and overall institutional quality was not always clear, nor was the feedback loop to curriculum planning processes.

Resourcing and supporting curriculum management

Most colleges suggested that resourcing curriculum management was achieved mainly through the designation of specific posts. External funding, pump priming and the use of staff remission were also frequently used. Only three colleges had a curriculum development fund earmarked within their overall budget. One college suggested that their internal resourcing model was designed to include and facilitate curriculum development and management activities, and as such did not necessitate a separate fund. Specific staff development to prepare and/or support staff in curriculum management posts varied enormously and overall seemed a little piecemeal. Only one college mentioned the link between staff development and curriculum evaluation. In one college there was evidence of interesting practice in relation to management development and support which gave each newly appointed manager a personal learning agenda as part of their interview de-briefing. This college also used external facilitators for group supervision of the management team.

Curriculum change and institutional re-alignment

All of the colleges had undergone at least one major re-organisation in the last five years and five colleges had undergone at least two. The spurs for the re-organisations varied and included the following reasons (often interconnected):

Person-led	the principal decided, or there was a new appointment at the top;
Curriculum-led	the need for a more flexible framework to support a coherent curriculum offer;
Resource-led	cuts, or the need for greater cost-effectiveness;
Externally-led	LEA-led, changes in the local economy;
Pragmatism-led	incorporation, need for a flatter structure and new role allocation.

Most colleges would like to develop a more corporate approach to management with emphasis on structures which facilitate collaboration rather than competition between groups of staff. However, one college did suggest a tension here between their plans to reward curriculum excellence and their wish to maintain the collaborative culture of the institution.

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THE FINDINGS: PHASE 2 PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

At the outset of the project it was anticipated that it would be fairly easy to identify three comparable posts across each of the colleges — one at the operational or delivery level, one at middle management level and one at senior management level, all with a responsibility for curriculum management. It was also assumed that differentiating curriculum management posts according to 'level' or seniority would be both appropriate and relevant. In the event this was not entirely the case, as there were many posts which could not be easily categorised according to job title, grade of post or level of responsibility.

Operational managers

Operational managers of the curriculum had a number of job titles such as programme manager, team leader or section leader and were usually graded on the FE management spine within the points range 3-6 or 4-8, or were graded as senior lecturers depending on the size of the college. Many of the posts within this category still carried a teaching load of eight to 16 hours per week.

Staff in this category were responsible for managing a course or programme area and had overall responsibility and accountability for curriculum management and development across the area. On a more practical level management of a programme area also included managing a staff team of anything up to 18 full-time staff and several part-time staff depending on the size of the section. Timetabling, resourcing, room allocation and a range of other day-to-day management tasks were also clearly evident.

The speed and breadth of curriculum change over the last few years was raised by almost all the respondents as a key issue. Not only had further education been subject to a range of externally imposed initiatives but colleges themselves had also changed in the way that they organised and delivered their services. The corresponding impact of these changes on post-holders' roles and responsibilities was received with mixed feelings:

> *'Looking back I was very naive when first appointed — managing a cost centre is part of my job which also includes strategic management in some ways. I just didn't realise how much that would involve'*

> *'Curriculum strategies now come via the senior management team and they're managed rather than a simple reactive approach'*

> *'Reduced course hours, flexible delivery, increases in student numbers — staff see this as an economic drive not an educational or curriculum drive'*

> *'The devolution of curriculum management responsibilities has not been matched by devolved administrative support — we're drowning in paper'*

There was clearly a tension between what was understood or assumed by the term 'curriculum management' and the various sub-tasks or duties associated with it. Some staff expressed a tension between balancing curriculum development (usually perceived as the creative, innovative dimension of curriculum management) and curriculum implementation (the delivery and monitoring and evaluation dimension). These tensions often became apparent in how such aspects were operationalised as part of day-to-day activities:

> *'Managing the curriculum means developing as well as managing — some people forget the former'*

> *'Can you define what are middle management tasks and what are operational tasks when it comes to curriculum management?'*

> *'If we're entrusted to manage change we ought to be entrusted with frontline communication — I'd prefer all the information rather than a "need-to-know" attitude'*

Appreciation of the central role of the curriculum was influenced by the overall ethos of the college or the value system of senior managers, i.e. formal roles and structures, though important could be thwarted or dominated by the more interpersonal or affective aspects of college experience:

> *'The curriculum will always be centre stage in this college because it really is central to our mission — it's also reflected in how the Principal operates on a day-to-day basis'*

> *'We are all part of a team here and that includes support staff. I know people care about me as a person as well as caring about the job I do'*

> *'I feel really supported since (the Principal) was appointed. He's very approachable, very effective and he listens'*

Despite the diversity of these posts, all staff at this level felt overloaded and under extreme pressure. If they were combining responsibility for curriculum management (including development, implementation and evaluation) with what often amounted to managing a small department, plus a teaching load and minimal administrative support, it was hardly surprising that individual staff felt overloaded. Suggestions for improving the job included:

> *'This job just might be manageable if I didn't have to teach 12 hours per week'*

> *'I don't want to lose any of my current responsibilities, even though they may seem over the top. I'd just like increased administrative support'*

> *'It's impossible to manage a team staffed entirely by part timers — it means I end up doing all the day-to-day management and administration for every single course rather than overall curriculum management'*

> *'It wouldn't be so bad if I felt I was valued in some way or that they cared about what I do or how I do it. I can think of lots of ways of rewarding staff despite the lack of a formal career structure'*

> *'Managing the curriculum is fine but the timescales for implementation make you feel you never do a "quality" job'*

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Middle managers with cross-college curriculum responsibility

Posts under this heading varied considerably according to the size of the college and the overall infrastructure at senior management level. Although true at the other levels, this was even more evident here. All respondents under this heading were graded on the FE management spine within the points range six-15 Some of the posts retained a small teaching load. The common focus for such posts was that they were concerned with the cross-college management of curriculum initiatives and projects, ensuring that such initiatives were implemented at an operational level through team/section leaders.

Experience of these posts varied enormously. Some staff experienced the inevitable conflict of having one foot in management and the other in mainstream teaching. In some cases (particularly in smaller colleges) staff saw themselves as clearly aligned with senior management with responsibility for curriculum management at a strategic level. However, others felt that despite relative status and seniority, they were forced to operate without any real power base. Perceptions of role and how the curriculum was being managed inevitably varied:

> *'My job is to persuade other staff who are not committed to the outcomes or curriculum decisions made by the senior management team'*

> *'I link directly into the college strategic planning cycle — I contribute my bit, agree targets and then I'm off'*

> *'Any (generalist) manager could do this job so long as there are curriculum experts at the next level down — team leader level'*

> *'I perceive potential overlaps as I don't know who knows what is going on "globally". For example, we have a new curriculum initiative on student contracts but will this mean the work we've previously been doing on individual action plans will disappear? I don't know if other people even realise it's a problem!'*

> *'The old model of curriculum activist doesn't work anymore — it has to be managed and co-ordinated'*

Although staff in this category tended to feel more valued than team leaders managing the curriculum at an operational level, they often remained unclear about the parameters of their responsibility and accountability. Suggestions for improving the job confirmed this:

> *'Greater clarity between the vice principal and head of department roles — who is ultimately responsible for curriculum management?'*

> *'A recognition that support and development work is a valuable part of the service and that it takes time and money'*

> *'Devolving funding is good but we need to be allowed to be creative with that funding'*

> *'Resourcing and supporting the next tier down i.e. the team leaders — that would make my job a lot easier'*

Senior managers with curriculum management responsibility

Senior managers with overall responsibility for curriculum management were usually assistant/deputy/vice principals or the principal. They were responsible and ultimately accountable for determining and implementing strategic curriculum priorities. Identifying future curriculum needs, responding to external initiatives and translating policy into strategy were seen as the primary purposes of such posts:

> *'My job is to know the "big picture" of the institution'*

> *'Our curriculum development work is project based. It's my job to put it all together in a coherent framework'*

Respondents in these posts, not surprisingly, appeared to be less unhappy about overload or work pressure partly because they had more control over their work. However they did experience one problem common to the cross-college middle managers — that of defining the parameters or balance of work. However for the senior managers this was largely in relation to their own post rather than their inter-relationship with other posts:

> *'I need to maintain a balance that allows curriculum issues rather than political issues to be the focus'*

> *'There's always more than you can do so you have to prioritise and focus — 90% of a college is about managing people, not money, and this post has enough scope to enable me to work to people's strengths'*

> *'I'm too influential; people tend to come directly to me, by-passing the official mechanisms'*

> *'Manipulating external policies to fit in with our own goals — it's a fusion between the two'*

Respondents in this category, unlike the other two found it very difficult to identify or suggest ways in which their jobs could be improved or made easier. Comments were individual and diverse:

> *'Business terminology is worrying — we could lose sight of why we're here'*

> *'Not feeling guilty would help'*

> *'More pro-active, creative colleagues'*

> *'Having clearer roles and responsibilities with managers accepting devolved responsibility'*

> *'Making the undiscussable discussable — unblocking'*

Relationships between the roles

In trying to ascertain the relationships between the various curriculum management roles it became clear that most respondents held fairly strong views about corresponding roles in their college structure. For example, many of the senior managers across the sample believed that curriculum manager posts at an operational level (team/section leaders) were the most important posts in the college.

'They are the driving force, the linchpin, the hub of the organisation!'

'Team leaders run this college.'

The operational managers often felt undervalued or isolated however, despite the view espoused at senior management level. This might be explained by the fact that senior managers, on the whole, had very little direct or systematic contact with operational managers. Where this contact did exist it made a significant difference to staff morale and the ability to cope with the job.

Cross-college curriculum manager posts, usually located at middle management level were still evolving and some senior managers suggested that such posts did not yet have a fully effective their structure. This problem was thought to be due to the lack of familiarity with such posts and the historical perceptions of what constitutes a middle manager:

'We consciously tried to make the focus of these posts curriculum management but staff familiarity with the head of department role inevitably results in similar demands and expectations.'

'Client services is now a visible, tangible entity and that helps other people's perception of my role'

'The structure needs modifying to give staff the right to someone's time — it shouldn't be a favour.'

The main point of contact for operational managers was usually a middle manager and so the personal style of the middle manager or a shared history was of greater significance than their role in the structure.

KEY ISSUES

Terminology

The way in which the curriculum is being managed in FE colleges is clearly a complex and somewhat fragmented process. The situation is further complicated by what people understand by the term 'curriculum management' which was sometimes reflected in a corresponding mismatch in the designation of roles and responsibilities. Although all the respondents interviewed had an identifiable curriculum management role, it was apparent from some respondents that curriculum management was seen as an umbrella term encompassing various distinctions and activities. In particular job titles distinguished the management of curriculum implementation and curriculum development. Some posts demonstrated curriculum research and the embedding of its results as special responsibilities.

Academic board

The role of the academic board, despite its 'constitutional' status, does not at present appear to be significant in most colleges. Although most staff acknowledged its formal role at a strategic level, other mechanisms tended to be used more frequently:

'For me, the academic board and its sub-committees represent the democratic or 'activist' forum but it doesn't take executive decisions'

'Our quality sub-committee of the academic board plays the central role'

'Everything is taken to the academic board but it is the senior management team that has the power of recommendation'

Training and development

Very few staff appeared to have formal or systematic training and development to prepare or support them in their curriculum management roles:

'I've spent a lot of my career initiating and developing staff training programmes including our own in-house middle management programme but I've never been on one myself!'

'FE is singularly bad at training people for their next job'

Where staff had undergone specific training, there still seemed to be a preference for 'learning on the job', and sometimes a view that time was too precious for training and development:

'My MBA was not that useful. I'm a Kolb learner — learn from experience, transfer and apply it'

'We do portfolio development here including MCI but it's all voluntary'

'I'm learning on the job and fast'

'I've no training in any kind of management — it's a big gap but I've no time to address it'

Goal setting and targets

Most respondents were able to set their own targets rather than having them imposed, although the targets and goals had to be set within the key aims and objectives of the college strategic plan. In identifying targets, respondents usually referred to tangible, outcome-based goals rather then process-based goals. They usually related to the managers' own responsibility for ensuring other people met their targets and goals. In some colleges staff had unclear or less precise goals in relation to their performance:

'I set my own targets which tend to fall within the agreed targets of the strategic plan — they will be linked to appraisal, eventually'

'Targets for me are set in negotiation with the head of department. We have a six-monthly target assessment meeting, i.e I'm invited into the "Star Chamber" to explain any mistakes or failures'

'I don't know if I'm set targets — if I am I don't know what they are and I certainly don't get any feedback on whether I'm meeting them or not'

A number of operational managers expressed concern that new targets or goals failed to build upon, or take account of previous curriculum initiatives. Poor communication and lack of systematic feedback on performance was clearly evident across all levels of the institutional hierarchy, with operational managers being most aware of this problem.

Devolving curriculum management

Recently there has been a trend in FE towards devolving curriculum management responsibility as near as possible to 'the point of delivery' in order to empower those most closely associated with the learner experience. In reality, this usually means disbanding the old 'robber baron' departmental structures and setting up individual cost centres for specific programme areas; also increasing the numbers of cross-college posts to maintain coherence in what could become a very fragmented structure. Translating such ideologies into reality does not always follow:

> *'It gets a bit much when you see them bringing in new filing cabinets and desks on the top floor, establishing a "student services suite" and creating a director of human resources post when we're still stuck in over crowded classrooms and staffrooms with a shortage of pens*

> *'What seems to have happened is that the non-teaching tasks in the department were taken away and centralised with the creation of new cross-college posts. Now such administration and non-teaching tasks have been devolved back to the department but they've kept hold of the staff'*

Incorporation

For many staff the impact of incorporation could not be seen in isolation. Changes in the nature of the curriculum and its delivery, combined with external funding pressures had resulted in most colleges reviewing how their curriculum could best be managed:

> *'You shouldn't underestimate the sheer scale of change and reorganisation that has already taken place during the last three years'*

> *'Incorporation has made people sit up, think and plan the service — it's not only had a positive effect on the students, but also on what we're doing'*

> *'Despite all the good things that have come about over the last few years, I would guess that most staff, even the most enthusiastic ones feel enough is enough'*

WAYS FORWARD

In the process of mapping developments and recording the direct experiences of practising curriculum managers, a number of key issues and concerns have been raised.

A holistic view

It now appears timely for colleges to revisit their existing policy statements in order to adopt a more corporate, holistic approach to the development of a curriculum policy. Colleges also need to recognise that the establishment of policy statements represent the first step in a much longer process, and that that process needs to be managed.

Curriculum processes

Managing the processes of curriculum development, curriculum implementation and curriculum evaluation is an onerous task, and one not always fully understood. Colleges may benefit from further consideration of such processes particularly in relation to task allocation and specific roles and responsibilities within their institution.

Organisational structures

Over the next few years, colleges may benefit from reviewing their curriculum organisational structures in relation to the designation of curriculum management posts. Cross-college curriculum management posts appear to be the least understood and as such, may be open to criticism or lack credibility within the organisation. The infrastructure at this level needs to be clarified and the core purposes of such posts clearly communicated across the college.

Staff responsibilities

Where staff roles are overloaded, especialy at operational level, prioritisation of tasks clearly increased role effectiveness and job satisfaction. It may also be helpful to quantify, rather than just qualify, the comparative volume of responsibilities and tasks allied to particular posts.

Involving and motivating staff

With the current disturbance of patterns of career development, developing the curriculum offers opportunities for main grade lecturers. Such staff it would seem, are 'disappearing' into their teaching role, preferring to 'keep their heads down' in the face of ever-increasing demands and the lack of tangible rewards and yet this is where much innovative work has traditionally taken place.

Human resource management

The management of human resources is a critical process through which organisational change, policies and strategic plans will be implemented. Colleges need to adopt a more systematic approach to supporting and developing staff in the achievement of both individual and institutional goals.

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