

**TITLE**

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**JOURNAL**

ReflectEd, St Mary's Journal of Education

**DATE DEPOSITED**

21 February 2018

**This version available at**

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# Students as Active Participants in Curriculum Design: Exploratory Implications for Career Path Choices

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether students' participation in curriculum design influences their career path choices (Bleakley & Brennan, 2011). In higher education student as active participants in curriculum design is an on-going debate. Some researchers have called for greater student's participation in the design of the curriculum (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Bovril et al., 2009; Butera, Gomes & Harris, et al., 2013). Others argue that there are potential challenges and suggest further research in this field (Reynolds et al., 2004; McLeod, 2011). Despite the large amount of research on the subject, there is limited research that has explored whether Business Management students participation in curriculum design influences their career path choices.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 Business Management Studies students in a single UK higher education institution, to ascertain how they have been encouraged to participate in curriculum design and whether participating in curriculum design has influenced their career path choices. The findings suggest that students' participation in curriculum design has contributed to them taking more responsibility for their own learning in order to achieve their chosen career paths.

*Key words: curriculum design, student's participation in curriculum design, career path choices*

## Introduction

Student participation in curriculum design<sup>1</sup> dates back to Dewey (1916). Within the literature there is a range of rationales for involving students as active participants in the design of curriculum (Kolb, 1984; Bovril et al., 2009). Some have found that students' participation in curriculum design contributes to students taking more responsibility for their own learning (Hooks, 1994) and commitment to learning (Kuh et al., 2010; Bovill, et al., 2011b). Others argue that where students have participated in curriculum design, they developed improved levels of confidence, satisfaction and critical thinking (Kumar, 2007; Senior, Ready & Senior, 2014). The review of literature found positive links between student participation in curriculum design and engagement (Bovril, et al., 2011a; Finn & Zimmer, 2012); empowerment (McLeod, 2011; Shafaei & Nejati, 2012) and employability skills (Knight & York, 2006; Senior et al., 2014). The evidence suggest that the consequences of not involving students in curriculum design is that they will feel less connected to the curriculum and their learning suffers (Konings, Brand-Gruwel, & Van Merriernboer, 2010).

The QAA Code of Practice (2010) assuring and enhancing academic quality and student engagement in higher education stipulates that higher education providers promote active involvement of students in all aspects of their learning such as, curriculum content,

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<sup>1</sup> Curriculum design is, in the words of The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA] (2010) a creative and often innovative activity.

programme and curriculum design. Most UK higher education institutions have policies to encourage students to take an active role in their learning. For instance, St Mary's University Twickenham Quality and Student Experience Enhancement Framework and St Mary's University Student Programme Representative Handbook actively promote ways student's voice is heard and acted upon. This pilot study will explore whether students' participation in curriculum design influences their chosen career paths.<sup>2</sup>

### **Research Aim**

The aim of the research is to develop our knowledge and understanding of whether students as active participants in curriculum design influence their career path choices.

### **Research Objectives**

- To identify how students are encouraged to be active participants in curriculum design.
- To ascertain whether students' participation in curriculum design influences their career choices.

### **Research Questions**

In light of the research aim and objectives, the study seeks to address the following research questions.

- How are students encouraged to be active participants in curriculum design?
- Does student's participation in curriculum design influence their career path choices?

### **Students' participation in curriculum design**

Research-based literature reviewed have found positive links between students participation in curriculum design and critical thinking and improved grades (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Finn & Zimmer, 2012), understanding of the learning process, collaborative learning, improved confidence and motivation (Cook-Sather, 2008; Bovrill et al., 2011b).

Trowler and Trowler (2010) state that the Higher Education's Academy (HEA) encourages students being involved in curriculum design. The National Union of Students (NUS) and HEA collaborated on a joint project, Student Engagement Project 2010, to support institutions and students' unions involving students in curriculum design and their learning experiences. However, questions have been raised about whether students have enough subject knowledge to meaningfully contribute to curriculum design (Slembrouck, 2000). Research suggests that responding sensitively to the diversity of the views of students is very important in the process. The benefits of involving students in curriculum design outweigh the challenges (Hooks, 1994; Kuh et al., 2010; Bovrill, et al., 2011a).

Positioning students as important stakeholders has been traditional practice at St Mary's University, Twickenham. Students are given opportunities to contribute their opinions about their learning experience. St Mary's University understands that student learning outcomes can be influenced by providing students with a range of knowledge, skills, and opportunities and encouraging them to contribute to curriculum planning and design. There

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<sup>2</sup> Career paths are a variety of trajectories and individual is willing to take in an organisation that fulfils her career needs (Petroni, 2000; Vos et al., 2007).

is still little known whether students as active participants in curriculum design influence their career path choices.

### **Career Paths**

The traditional career model concept of a career path conceptualises a career path as a vertical progression by an individual within an organisation hierarchy determined by the organisation (Kanter, 1989). The boundaryless career model conceptualises a career path as vertical and non-vertical moves determined by an individual's values, needs and decisions between personal and professional life (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Arthur, 2014). From this perspective the individual's career motives and values influences his/her selection and choices of their career paths (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 2014). DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) and Arthur and Rousseau (1996) posit that individuals are taking responsibility for accumulating and developing marketable skills and competencies; in order to determine their career paths due to changes taking place in the economy and labour market such as:

1. Organisational restructuring (downsizing and de-layering) has led to the reduction of the workforce and the number of hierarchical tiers within the organisational structure;
2. Technological advances in communication and information technology have led to changes in flexible forms of working; and,
3. Demographic and labour market changing; the population is aging; individuals are staying on at work longer even after they have reached the state retirement age and this is impacting on the labour market (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) suggest that in order for an individual to pursue a successful boundaryless career path, it is crucial that the individual acquires the skills and competencies to know why, whom and how to develop their career paths. DeFillippi and Arthur (1994: 309) employ the phrase "intelligent career model" to describe the knowledge, skills and competencies required for the selection and choices of career path by the individual.

The intelligent career model emphasises a focus on individual's acquiring knowledge, skills and consideration of how these skills can be applied to develop their career paths (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). In this regard, the acquisition of information, knowledge, competencies and employability skills are essential, enabling the individual to seek employment opportunities available in the wider labour market. Arthur and Rousseau (1994) described the intelligent career as unfolding through three 'ways of knowing':

- "Knowing-why": Knowing why competencies relate to individual's personal values and motivation. These competencies provide the individual with a sense of purpose, career clarity, and identification with the world of work;
- "Knowing-whom": Knowing whom competencies are network relationships that individuals have inside and outside organisational boundaries in order to develop contacts and reputation which can assist them to progress their career; and,
- "Knowing-how": Knowing how competencies encompass the skills and knowledge individuals accumulates over time through learning and work; that is transferable across organisational and occupational boundaries.

Developing these competencies gives individuals skills and knowledge they need to acquire to enable them to self-manage their career paths (Arthur, 1994). Thus, their individual's loyalty is owed to their career interest and needs. Supporting this viewpoint, Sodergeren (2002) argues that individuals are more interested in gaining opportunities and accumulating knowledge to make career path choices. The focus for individuals is to develop skills and knowledge which are applicable in employment position of their choice.

However, some authors contend that Arthur's (1994) three competencies do not encompass all of the necessary competencies that are important in developing a career path that is self-managed by the individual (Coetzee & Roythorne-Jacobs, 2007). Coetzee and Roythorne-Jacobs (2007) suggest additional three competencies. These are described as follows:

- "Know-what": Knowing what competencies refer to job opportunities and job requirements that the individual may address when applying for new jobs;
- "Know-where": Knowing where competencies are the relevant information gathering process, required to understand the training and advancement opportunities before entering the workplace; and,
- "Know-when": Knowing when competencies refer to the timing of job searching activities that can assist the individual in acquiring the right job.

These additional contributions to the intelligent career model emphasise the need for individuals to understand their strengths and aspirations in order to manage their learning and career paths in the changing employment environment. For instance, if an organisation is no longer able to offer an individual a career path that is suited to the individual's needs, the individual acquires knowledge, information and marketable skills that will make it easier for the individual to pursue a career path that is suited to his or her needs within the wider employment market (Coetzee & Roythorne-Jacobs, 2007). Sullivan and Baruch (2009) contend that one of the advantages of the intelligent career model is that it can be beneficial to individuals with the right competencies and skills which are applicable in different organisational contexts as the opportunity arises. The intelligent career model is chosen for the purpose of this research, because the model has proved to be regarded as being valuable when assessing how individuals acquire skills and knowledge required to pursue their preferred career paths (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Maher, 2009).

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this research was designed to allow the collection and analysis of data on whether students' participation in curriculum design influences their career path choices. The intent of this process is to answer the research questions and for the research to further the body of knowledge and understanding of the link between students as active participants in curriculum design and their career path choices.

## **Research Approach**

The approach adopted for the research is the inductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011). An inductive approach allows for information and data to be collected, classified and potential theory or theories developed as a result of the data analysis. Proponents of this approach assert the need to not simply establish a cause-effect relationship between variables "without an understanding of the way in which humans interpret their social world" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009: 37). This research is based on a small sample of St Mary's University Twickenham, Management Studies students' experience of participating

in curriculum design. During the interview, participants recount experiences out of their own perspectives and interpretation of events of how they have participated (or not) in curriculum design (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### Data Collection

The research adopted a cross-sectional data collection approach. Data was gathered over a two month period (April – June 2014). Given the aim and objectives of the research, the research questions and insufficient prior research on the subject matter, the researcher decided to employ a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews). Semi-structured interview technique allows for a degree of flexibility for the participants to expand on their responses. It allows the researcher to explore and understand the range of feelings, attitudes and motivation expressed by each participant, enabling them to gain a better understanding of each individual account of their experience of participating in curriculum design. Also the advantages of one-to-one semi-structured interviews are that participants can talk freely about their perspectives and perceptions without being restricted in time or being observed by the presence of a third person. According to Saunders et al., (2011) the value of using qualitative research (semi-structured interviews) hinges on the flexibility it offers to explore the complexity of the subject matter. Therefore, as long as the research questions fit in with the research aim and objectives this approach can provide productive results.

A small sample of face-to-face semi-structured interviews was carried out with 14 Business Management students (see Table 1.1). Interviews ranged from 35-65 minutes.

Table 1.1 Participants in Semi-structured interviews

Participant	Level	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
A	4	F	18	White-British
B	4	M	19	White-British
C	4	M	19	Asian-British
D	4	F	18	White-European
E	5	M	20	White-British
F	5	M	20	White-Irish
G	5	F	21	Black-British
H	5	F	20	Black-British
I	6	M	22	White-British
J	6	F	21	White-British
K	6	F	22	White-British
L	6	F	21	Asian-British
M	6	M	22	White-Irish
N	6	M	21	White-European

The sample comprised of seven female and seven male students, all of whom are registered on the Business Management Programme at St Mary’s University, Twickenham. The type of sampling used for this research is purposive sampling; this is where the researcher uses his/her own judgement to select cases that will best enable the research questions to be answered. This is an appropriate method to use when participants are required to have some understanding and experience of the subject area (Saunders et al., 2011; Bryman &

Bell, 2011) which applies in this research context. This method of data collection is highly recommended for exploratory research such as this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### **Interview Process**

At the beginning of the interview the researcher explained the purpose of the research and why the participant was selected. Each participant was given time to ask questions about the research before the interview started. A series of questions was designed to collect the participants' demographic details and their experience of participating in curriculum design. The interview questions were designed to ascertain students' understanding of curriculum design and how they have been encouraged to participate in curriculum design. The notes from the interviews were comprehensive and gave data which answered the research questions. Data quality issues, such as reliability and validity attached to interviews were taken into consideration; to some extent, semi-structured interviews are deemed (Saunders et al., 2011) to make a better case for reliability as it uses a slightly standardised approach. However, the claim to absolute reliability in qualitative research cannot be made (Saunders et al., 2011; Silverman, 2013). Validity issues were enhanced by the use of open questions; this allowed the researcher and the participants to explore and confirm understandings to a greater degree than is possible when using a survey method.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

On completion of the interviews, the first stage of the analysis involved a process of familiarisation which began by reading through the notes taken at the interviews noting the content and meaning and looking for meaningful analysis. Therefore, in order to identify key issues and emerging issues raised by the participants, a thematic framework was constructed from the information gathered from the interviews. The framework consists of three charts (Ritchie & Spencer, 1996) which are based on research question themes: curriculum design; participation in curriculum design; and, career path choices. This was developed to specify the data as a whole to consider the range of responses for each theme. The charts were reviewed for opinions participants expressed as to the importance of being involved in curriculum design, these were lifted onto another chart to assist in the preparation for discussions, conclusion and recommendations.

### **Ethical Issues**

Ethical considerations in education and management research are paramount in order to avoid any risk to the physical, psychological, health and social wellbeing of the participants (Babbie, 2007; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2011). Before commencing data collection, the researcher verbally informed each participant of the purpose, benefit of the study to the University and the Higher Education sector, and where the findings would be presented and published. All participants stated their willingness to participate in the research. To maintain anonymity, participants are identified by an alphabet letter. This was to ensure that readers of the research could not identify the views of specific individuals.

### **Methodological Limitations**

The present study is a small step towards a better understanding of whether students' participation in curriculum design influences their career path choices. One of the limitations of the research methodology relates to the selection of the sample. The findings need to be reviewed with some caution as all the participants were undergraduate Business

Management students from one UK University. It was not possible to select participants randomly from all UK Universities because of the limited resources and the time to complete the research.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The research findings and discussions will be presented under the headings of the research questions. The findings serve the purpose of guiding Programme Directors, module convenors and lecturers in our reflective attempts to improve curriculum design by involving students for their benefits and to achieve a higher quality of teaching and education for students.

#### **RQ1: How are students encouraged to be active participants in curriculum design?**

Most participants reported that they have been encouraged by lecturers to participate in selecting the course text book, designing module questionnaire feedback, completing module evaluation forms and choosing the topic for their research project. This was supported by statements such as:

“I was asked to help with designing a feedback questionnaire for MGTXXX ... we worked in groups and said what we think. We gave our views and made suggestions .... I enjoyed it” (Participant: K).

“I was asked last year if there was any particular textbook that I found helpful for MGTXXX .... I said I found xxx easy to understand ... and this year it’s one of the books on the recommended reading list” (Participant: E).

“At the end of term I complete a module evaluation form for each module ... I said what I want to say about lectures and things I’ve learnt in lectures and that ... I sometimes make suggestions about lecture times ... some start too early and hardly any one comes ... I’ve said start lectures at 10am and more people will come ... this term some lectures were starting later ... good turnout ... more people come” (Participant: F).

These statements suggest that students have been encouraged to contribute to several areas of curriculum design. On the whole, students held a positive view of how they have been consulted. The evidence supports [Cook-Sather, \(2008\)](#) and [Bovril et al., \(2011\)](#) views that involving students in curriculum design enhances students’ understanding of the learning process. The findings also reveal that St Mary’s University Quality and Student Experience Enhancement Framework (to actively engage students so that the student voice is heard and acted upon) are being implemented and benefiting students.

#### **RQ2: Does student’s participation in curriculum design influence their career path choices?**

Over half of the participants reported that they have participated in programme meetings where they suggested activities to be include in the curriculum. Some of their suggestions include inviting guest speakers, fieldwork, visits to companies and student projects involving collaboration with external agencies.

Some participants reported:

"I want to work in HRM [Human Resources Management] I said to my lecturer if we can meet HRM managers to get an insight into what they actually do ... it has been arranged ... I'm going to shadow a HR manager in a few weeks' time" (Participant: G).

"I've chosen the work placement module ... we were told to find a company ... a placement in the field we would want to work ... my placement was in a charity at XXX. I enjoyed working there. The experience will look good on my CV when the time comes to look for work" (Participant: L).

"We are given the freedom to make decisions about our research project. You see I'll like to go into finance ... work for one of the banks in the city ... so it was important to me that my research is in this area. When I told my tutor my topic she agreed straightaway" (Participant: J)

Participant G, A and J statements clearly show that students' participation in curriculum design helps them to gain the knowledge required for their chosen career path. These participants identified areas within the curriculum that will give them skills and knowledge they require to develop for their chosen career paths. The evidence supports DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) view that individuals are acquiring information, knowledge and competencies essential to enable them to seek employment opportunities and to pursue their career path choices. In addition, several participants commented that they have been consulted on topics they want to be included in some modules to help them achieve their career path choices. These participants reported:

"A management role is like being Jack of all trades... being flexible with your job role ... I like to have a say in what is included in the curriculum ... so that I'm prepared ... when I graduate ... don't get me wrong our tutors are great ... it's my career on the line here ... I've done my research... I know what skills the companies want out there" (Participant: H)

"I would like tutors enter to consultation with us [students] before the scheme of work is put into the handbook. We know what we want to do ... I want to be a marketer ... some marketing options will be nice (Participant: M).

"I'll like module convenors at the end of semester to discuss more of what we are going to learn next semester... how our learning will help us to develop skills for personal development and industry. Employers are looking for us to have certain skills when we go for interviews ... it all helps" (Participant: I).

These participants wish to be encouraged to contribute more to discussions about course content and a range of learning opportunities. They are clearly motivated and interested in participating in curriculum design that will help them meet their career needs. The findings support Coetzee and Roythorne-Jacobs's (2007) view that individuals are accumulating competencies; before entering into the work place. However, contrary views were expressed by some participants; they reported that they have not been asked to participate in curriculum design.

“No one asked me about curriculum design ... I completed module evaluation forms to say what I think of the module ... that’s all (Participant: B)

“Curriculum design .... Isn’t the role of the teacher ... ye ... it’s for them the teachers to do ... I wasn’t asked to help in no curriculum design” (Participant: D)

Participants that reported that they were not consulted about curriculum design were mostly level four students who did not always understand what curriculum design means. Although these participants reported being unfamiliar with curriculum design they spoke at length about what they hope it might mean and their desire to be consulted in curriculum design. Such comments are helpful to lecturers in rethinking how to involve level four students in curriculum design.

### **Conclusion**

The research has identified that students are actively participating in curriculum design by choosing course text books, topics for their research projects, identifying guest speakers from industry, work experience and placements. The students are aware of why, whom, when, where, how and what competencies (Arthur & Rousseau, 1994; Coetzee & Roythorne-Jacobs, 2007) they need for their career choices. This is evident in the participants’ responses. The students’ participation in curriculum design has contributed to them taking more responsibility for their own learning in order to meet their career path needs. The research shows that St Mary’s University’s Quality and Student Experience Enhancement Framework (to actively engage students so that the student voice is heard and acted upon) are being implemented, except in some occasions where level four students have not been inducted on how they can participate in curriculum design.

Therefore, if Higher Education Institutions want students to participate in curriculum design, Programme Directors, lecturers, student union officials and support services staff should inform and prepare students during induction week of the process and benefits of participating in curriculum design. Such an approach might enable students to become more meta cognitive about their own learning, development and pursuing career path choices. In addition, curriculum planners might want to ask these questions at the start of the planning process:

- What type of career paths are students going on to?
- What should be included in the curriculum to prepare students for future careers?
- Have we built-in opportunities for flexibility in the curriculum to support students to gain the skills and knowledge required by changes in industry?

Students should be supported and encouraged throughout their time at university to relate their learning to their career path choices as an on-going process. The research findings provide insights on how students’ participation in curriculum design benefits them in pursuing their chosen career paths. However, the findings are based on data from Business Management students of a single institution in which some of the findings are specific to that institution. However, students’ benefits of actively participating in curriculum design are likely to be generalisable beyond the case study institution. It is anticipated that future research will include data from a larger cohort in order to develop guidelines and recommend practical steps and policies that will promote and support students to actively participate in curriculum design.

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