Developing the Credit-based Modular Curriculum in Higher Education

Challenge, Choice and Change

Mick Betts and Robin Smith

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In the 21st Century knowledge will become increasingly less valuable and prized as the currency of education. The separation between knowledge and learning will become wider. Technology will make access to knowledge easier than ever before, for more people than ever before. It will become the role of Higher Education (HE) to provide higher order learning skills as well as, and eventually rather than, knowledge of subject disciplines. Of course, it has always been more valuable to be able to say what a poem might mean than to recite it, but in a knowledge and information-rich world these skills of analysis and interpretation will be at a higher premium. The implications of this for teachers in HE are far reaching. The knowledge transmission model will be dead. The CD Rom and other digital devices will be the source of much knowledge and information. The need for the teacher’s role to become one of mediator, mentor, listener, facilitator, interpreter and critical friend will be real and pressing. As Barnett states when reviewing the profound changes that have occurred in university education:

There are not one or two but multiple knowledges. Process knowledge, tacit knowledge, action learning, experiential learning. All these terms point to the multiplication of our ways of knowing in the modern world. The point is not that the sites of knowledge production are proliferating; it is that the academy’s definitions of knowledge are increasingly challenged. (Barnett, 1997, p. 3)

Those who express contempt, confusion or professional insult at having their teaching role described as above will nevertheless have to become practitioners of this approach, if not advocates of it. They may take comfort however that such an approach rescues education from its recent past concern with imposing facts, and liberates the teacher and student by requiring a creative engagement with those facts and a renewed seeking out of that knowledge. In 1854, through Mr Gradgrind, Dickens in *Hard Times* satirized the value of an obsession with ‘facts’ in education. Facts were all the lumpen proletariat could manage. At the threshold of the 21st century, aiming as we are at mass participation in HE, we should perhaps re-appraise the situation. Credit accumulation and transfer
systems, or CATS as they are often referred to, and the parallel curriculum framework based on modular systems are part of that re-appraisal. In many ways they liberate the student and teacher, in other ways they constrain them.

In the UK, Credit-based Modular Systems (or CBMS as we will call them throughout) have been created through a fragmented and inconsistent process of piecemeal development. For good practical reasons they were developed by deconstructing the traditional curriculum model of higher education rather than by building a new system from bottom up. The British system of higher education (HE) has not been particularly receptive to modular systems and credit accumulation and transfer. For many, indeed, most universities, which have adopted CBMS, the change is very recent. The credit-based modular curriculum system, has at its heart a revolutionary approach to HE. Revolutionary, that is, for the UK system, which for 800 years has been designed not with flexibility in mind or student choice, but to be tutor centred. It is based on the principle of an elite club which only a few can be allowed to join. In the UK Higher Education has for many years been the territory of the privileged few. Participation rates remained no more than 7 per cent in the 1960s.

Degree programmes were governed by certain strictly adhered to principles. Degree study was predominantly full-time. Part-time modes were parallel forms of full-time programmes taken by students who for some reason had failed to capitalize on the opportunities offered at 18. In England, degrees were three years long (or occasionally longer if they included the need for additional study as in the case of work placements or languages). In Scotland they were four. The time element was important. In the UK system, standards related to pace. Students were expected to gain their degrees within a ‘normal’ period of time. Any longer demonstrated that the student had failed to achieve the desired standards. On the other hand the rarer part-time degrees were lengthy affairs, often six years, doubling the time needed for the full-time degree, demonstrating there was no easy or backdoor route into the graduate club.

Much changed during the 1970s, but many traditional attitudes remained. Many of the dilemmas to which this book makes reference stem from the attempts to place upon the rigid, traditional HE culture of the UK an educational philosophy which stresses flexibility. Most developments in the modular curriculum were initiated in the polytechnics, such as Oxford. It is hardly surprising that the initiative came through that route. The polytechnics had no traditions, but they did have a shared mission based upon the common control and ownership by the local educational authorities. They had a need to serve the community, especially the local community. Their importance to the business environment was emphasized. They embraced a wider range of provision including sub-degree programmes through BTEC and a strange new two year programme called the Dip HE. They also started to introduce a greater range of part-time provision. They had in the Council for National Academic Awards (their validating and awarding authority) an organization that facilitated debate, unhindered by the labyrinthine concerns of university senates. The CNAA was
flexible in its approach to curriculum development, was engaged with the international community, including the USA, and open in its deliberations. At the same time, the Open University (which started in 1972) was breaking new ground in terms of the intended student body and the way it served its learners through its unique method of delivery. Again, flexibility, breaking down tradition and taken for granted ways of approaching the academic world, became a key factor in its success. Like the polytechnics and the CNAA, the OU had to fight prejudice, and its students had to wait many years before their degrees were ranked as equivalent to the ‘proper’ degrees of the university sector generally.

These debates are still playing themselves out now but the backdrop has changed. The 30 per cent or more participation rate that is now aimed for has introduced a mass education system. More significantly, the nature of the intake has changed. As Gareth Williams identifies, statements relating to the 30 per cent participation rate are often based on the involvement in full-time higher education of young people usually in the context of degree study. If part-time and more mature individuals are considered then ‘the probability of any individual entering higher education is nearly double this figure’ (Williams, 1997, p. 4). Mass participation has brought a call for diversity. Business, industry and the professions have become key players and consumer choice has become important, not just in HE but within society generally. Accountability has also become a watchword, so much that was hidden and cozy in HE has now had to be made explicit. The credit-based modular curriculum reflects this new approach to UK life. It emphasizes more explicit outcomes in relation to each small part of the degree, rather than the more broadly defined ‘course’ in general. There is a more closely articulated relationship between these outcomes, the levels of achievement and assessment. There is greater student autonomy in constructing the programmes and a greater range of entry gates and exit points. All this is a long way from the traditional three year degree programme designed by university staff for the 18-year-old with three ‘A’ levels.

In the 1990s, institutions were faced with the need to develop more flexible, faster and cheaper ways of meeting the needs of the growing number of students. They started to develop modular programmes based on credit accumulation systems in parallel with, or based on, existing curriculum frameworks. It has been claimed that 90 per cent of institutions have adopted the modular or unitised curriculum (HEQC, 1996a) but these vary considerably in their nature and the extent to which they are modular or, more importantly, have the key design features of CBMS. According to work undertaken as part of the Graduate Standards Programme, only 7 per cent of universities are still ‘predominantly linear’, 26 per cent are unitized or partially so, and 67 per cent are modular or partly modular. Some 60 per cent of universities claim to have become modular or unitized since 1992 and 80 per cent of institutions claim to have established credit frameworks (HEQC, 1997a). These figures cover up a multitude of sins, however. The predominant British model of HE has been that a few students enter a few institutions and are taught, over a fixed period, a programme of study
predominantly determined by the authors of the content (the tutors) and are then subject to an assessment to determine the extent to which the knowledge has been successfully imbibed. Credit accumulation and transfer systems and modular systems require a programme of study that is not necessarily time-based, is periodically assessed, is transparent in its outcomes and reflects the shift of influence from the tutor to the student. A model which reflects much more an open USA ethos rather than the closed British one. Modular and credit-based courses had their origins in the USA for much the same reason that they developed a century later in the UK. As Theodossin states:

In the latter part of the nineteenth century pressures grew to replace the uniform classical curricula with something more suited to contemporary needs. At a philosophical level, there was a growing acceptance of student-centred learning and of John Dewey’s advocacy of self realisation achieved through study fitting the individual’s interest. There was also increasing demand for courses of a practical nature relevant to the real world. (Theodossin, 1986, p. 5)

Thus in the UK an evolutionary approach has been taken. Existing models were adapted incrementally. It would not, of course, have been possible to start with a blank sheet of paper either within individual institutions or nationally. However, many of the dilemmas now faced in CBMS institutions derive from the failure to appreciate the extent to which CBMS and its underpinning philosophy represents radical change which requires sophisticated change management. However, the reality has been drip feed development and crisis management. The mismatch and clash between the still predominant old culture and the attitudinal changes required to underpin CBMS, requires effective strategies to enable transition from one curriculum model to another within an institution. However good the transitional arrangements within specific institutions, there remains a significant group of dilemmas that arise because those institutions must remain in a system which is uncomfortable with itself and has not adjusted to the new mass higher education system in the UK.

This book focuses on these dilemmas. Whilst it aims to describe some of the more common approaches to CBMS from a practical stance, to enable those who wish to follow the CBMS path to identify the various options open to them, it also attempts, in addition, to do what in the authors’ view has been lacking in the literature written by enthusiasts for CBMS. This is to identify in an explicit manner the inherent dilemmas that are created by CBMS approaches and to recognize that certain of the issues arising from these dilemmas have no single or simple solutions. Much of where we are now is still uncharted territory. Institutional culture and value systems to underpin CBMS have yet to be developed. Too often the enthusiasts for credit-based modular programmes within universities (and we count ourselves amongst these) have stormed ahead developing their guidelines, regulations and systems and left the vast majority of
colleagues bobbing along in their wake. There are many questions that still need to be asked. Not all of them have answers, but they are nevertheless important if reluctant credit accumulators and modularizers are going to be convinced that it is worth entering into dialogue. CBMS still has a long way to go before it gains acceptance amongst many opinion leaders in higher education and before it becomes the universal curriculum model that enthusiasts seek for it. It will not achieve this goal by steam rolling its way forward. We must recognize that the UK credit-based modular systems are based on a philosophy that has it roots only a few inches below the surface. It runs counter to a HE philosophy and ideology that withstood the test of time. Financial pressures are making the introduction of a mass UK HE system more problematic. If we want HE to be driven by a clear educational philosophy, rather than by the forces of the market, then the debate required to arrive at a consensual view needs to be brought into the foreground.

The older ideology still has some powerful adherents. Debates about standards, i.e. the lowering of standards in HE, have given opponents of new fangled innovations imported from the alien US culture greater opportunity to denigrate. Many of the issues currently facing HE, however, are pertinent irrespective of CBMS. The introduction and growth of CBMS has often served to direct attention away from the issues per se or has exposed flaws in the traditional systems which have been in existence for many years and which have nevertheless been associated with the problematic nature of CBMS. The dubious, inconsistent and arbitrary practices of the universities’ examinations boards are now exposed through the transparency of the CBMS assessment system. The difficulty of establishing comparability between subject disciplines and institutions, the weaknesses of the external examiner system and the precarious nature of the classification system have all been present for many years. CBMS did not create them, it exposed them. It is important to draw out these issues, and face them rather than hoping that they will go away or that time will bring capitulation from one side or the other.

The credit-based modular system represents a fundamental and revolutionary change to the HE curriculum. It cannot be grafted on to the existing institutional practices piecemeal. It sits uncomfortably within the existing national structure. The move towards CBMS requires changes in organizational systems, procedures and frameworks. Most importantly, it requires changes in organizational and national culture. This is not easily achieved. Fullan (1991) suggests that we need to be supported in changing even in the direction of change to which we subscribe. Support can be given more easily if dilemmas are public, subject to real discussion and real consultation and acted on accordingly. The motivation for writing this book came out of a sense of unease about the way the discussion and consultation were being conducted. We had a sense that organizations such as some of the newly established consortia were rail-roading the supporters of CBMS into compromises without the dialogue and agreement that is required if real change is to occur and if recalcitrant colleagues are to be convinced. Dearing’s unworkable qualifications framework (Dearing, 1997, p.
143) is a clear example of the dangers of closed consultation as we discuss in Chapter 9.

The early enthusiasts of CBMS were operating in a context very different from the 1990s. Modular courses were rare in the UK. The binary divide between autonomous universities and the less prestigious local authority controlled polytechnics was very concrete, and credit accumulation was a novel concept. Against this background the advocates were faced not just with educational issues but political problems. CBMS, as the period since its introduction has demonstrated, has been a remarkable lever towards innovation in many different areas. Certainly it undermined many long held conventions in the academic world. The predominant CBMS model adopted in the UK of undergraduate programmes being rated at 360 credits made up of modules at three levels, was an understandable response to accommodate the conventional academic world. It also helped to introduce CBMS with the minimum of fuss and without the perceived need for protracted debate. The education world has moved on. The explosive nature of CBMS in challenging long held assumptions is now readily visible. The time has now come to review where we are and seek to find solutions to dilemmas based on curriculum and pedagogic principles rather than structural and political ones.

Credit-based systems of education offer the opportunity to ‘the system’ to take advantage of many innovations which governments (of all shades) seek to encourage. As Kennedy recognizes in the context of Further Education:

Education and training must become much more flexible in order to meet the needs of those in under represented groups. There should be a national framework of credit for further education…. This framework will provide accreditation for interim achievement. Learners will be able to chart their learning gain, get recognition for their work and build up credit through their lives. (Kennedy, 1997, p. 86)

Similar sentiments have been expressed by Dearing in the context of HE (Dearing, 1997). CBMS provides a platform for a range of flexible approaches. Credit-based systems can foster in-company accreditation for example, and thus build upon company-based training and facilitate the development of a highly skilled and well educated work force (see Chapter 5). The processes of the Accreditation of Prior and Prior Experiential Learning (APL/APEL) encourage individuals to build upon past success and therefore maximize potential and gain credit for what has already been achieved (see Chapter 6). The system acts as a magnet moving a static workforce towards higher levels of skill and qualification. APL/APEL has provided the single most important means of providing accelerated awards. These factors have enabled larger numbers of students from all walks of life and age groups to move through the higher education system in a way that in comparative terms is much cheaper than under the older regime. Credit-based modularity enables the design of programmes to meet students’
needs, thus moving the curriculum from the supply side (what universities want
to deliver) to the demand side (what students and their employers identify as
what they want). We must not underestimate the radical change that this
represents. We must prepare for the impact on resource management, staffing,
employment contracts, facilities’ management, student recruitment, guidance,
support and a whole range of related matters.

However, universities that have adopted the reality rather than the rhetoric of
the CBMS philosophy find themselves falling foul of a variety of systems and
processes that are deeply ingrained within the HE psyche and are also reinforced
by government’s lack of real understanding of the true potential. Bringing the
Department of Education together with the Department of Employment has not
yet demonstrated a mind set that can really appreciate and encourage
development. Universities with traditional missions fare better in the league
tables than those which are most innovatory because the league tables are built
upon implicit missions which hark back to the 1950s and beyond. The lack of
progress in developing true measures of ‘value added’ has allowed those
institutions that have missions which do not fully accord with the philosophy
underpinning CBMS to continue to thrive, while those that do not struggle for
recognition and resources. This is a particularly sharp irony in a government
inspired culture that has espoused the concept of ‘value addedness’ so
vehemently. Funding methodologies have not yet identified credit as their base
(although there has been much talk for a long time) and external quality bodies
fight shy of really tackling credit-based systems.

Credit-based modular systems are not value free. Conventionally, higher
education has been covered in a cloak of mystery. Examination boards and
marking systems have been shrouded in the mysteries of professional secrecy.
However, CBMS requires a more open and explicit approach to all areas of the
assessment process, from the explicit outlining of module outcomes to the
establishment of clear criteria for their assessment. Teachers are also required to
consider how to structure teaching and learning activity in order that outcomes
might be achieved and measured through the assessment. Students on CBMS
programmes become aware very quickly of the rules governing the game and are
therefore able to challenge the taken for granted mores of institutions. They can
manipulate their learning and manage their achievements. They become the
subject of the educational process rather than the passive object of it. Once you
allow for greater openness and choice you begin to allow the student to challenge
the almost divine right of academic authorities in matters of once holy writ. This
has far reaching effects not just upon staff within the university but upon others
who have traditionally sought to control the curriculum.

Chief amongst these are the professional bodies. It is not possible to generalize
about the reactions of the professional bodies to CBMS, but few have embraced
the developments with enthusiasm, although many are beginning to see that
CBMS is here to stay and may indeed have something to offer. The negative
reaction was much to do with a philosophy, held for a long time, that to reach
professional goals the student must be constrained to cover a more rigid and often allegedly more rigorous syllabus. What is more, this syllabus is sequentially progressive and therefore the order as well as the content, becomes inviolable. This view has led some universities to distort the nature of their CBMS (and indeed traditionally constructed) programmes rather than challenge the long held beliefs that the professional body is always right. Clearly, the professional bodies have the power to refuse accreditation and this has meant that such challenges have had to be carefully approached. However, the climate is changing as more universities recognize the need for CBMS programmes for institutional survival. This recognition is beginning to have an impact on the professional bodies, even the most conservative ones, although it is not without precedent for staff to misrepresent the views of the professional body in order to frustrate CBMS policy development within their own institution! 

In many areas flexible credit-based modular programmes are beginning to be attractive for the purpose of continuing professional development (CPD), allowing busy professionals to construct their own programmes best suited to their individual professional needs. Professional bodies are beginning to wake up to the fact that if they are to achieve their in-service goals, such flexible programmes are crucial. Modularity and credit accumulation provide the backbone to such developments for them. Crucially, the flexibility of credit-based modularity enables dynamic continuous development of the curriculum that defines a professional area, and the professional recognition that goes with it. Modularity enables incremental review and gives to professional bodies a context and structure for research (ideally in partnership with the universities). It is, after all, in everyone’s interest that the ‘licence to practise’ that professional body recognition confers is up to date, thereby increasing the employability of the graduate and enhancing the status and reputation of the companies represented in the professional body area. The explicit use of learning outcomes, fundamental to CBMS, brings to vocational areas a level of detail relating to professional competencies that conventional syllabi rarely achieved or aimed for. Under CBMS, professional bodies can feel more secure that the professional skills that they seek to guarantee are explicitly focused upon, whereas in traditional programmes there is the danger that these outcomes can be submerged within the important concerns of the university for intellectual rigour, with its emphasis on theory and knowledge-based success. Modular programmes, which emphasize continuous assessment and therefore diversity of assessment practices, encourage institutions to move away from the traditional examination which fails to access or assess, in any direct measure, many of the professional skills. CBMS programmes encourage innovatory methods of assessment directly linked to the learning outcomes identified within the module. Skills such as report writing, interpersonal communications, practical and group skills all become amenable to direct measurement. While programmes measured by end of year examinations and professional body examinations run the risk of granting a licence to practise on the 40 per cent of 40 per cent model i.e. an examination which requires a pass
mark of 40 per cent from an examination paper which covers only part of the syllabus (see below). Continuous assessment against explicit learning outcomes makes the granting of professional body recognition a more predictable, representative and quality assured process (see Chapters 3 and 4).

There could, of course, be the accusation that such approaches whilst protecting the interests of the professional body undermine what is truly higher in higher education, the ability to identify relevant theory and knowledge and apply it to a particular case. This has been the attack on the National Council for Vocational Qualifications and the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications especially as they move into undergraduate and postgraduate areas of HE. Here again credit-based modularity can counter this. Because of the transparency of outcomes, module developers are confronted with the question, ‘What is credit being awarded for?’ This requires them to make plain the development of theory and knowledge outcomes in a precise way and indicate the articulation with the related skills required for success. For this reason, NVQs can be embedded within so called academic modules but cannot of themselves be awarded higher education level academic credit.

Professional bodies are one special kind of awarding body. There are numerous other bodies such as the English National Board for Nursing and Midwifery (ENB), City and Guilds and Edexcel Foundation (previously BTEC), that make awards for programmes of study that either result from a fixed syllabus followed by an institution or which give recognition to a syllabus devised ‘in-house’. Some of these bodies are powerful, others are small and often obscure. Nevertheless they all have a view about the worth and equivalence of their own awards, and therefore the national and institutional debates about credit worth and level impinge upon their interests. It must remain the individual university’s responsibility to determine the credit value of an external award rather than the awarding body itself, since it is in the interest of the awarding body to grant itself as much credit at whatever level that it can muster. Indeed we argue later that this same principle (that of the separation of those responsible for course design from those responsible for the awarding of credit) should operate within institutions themselves as part of their quality assurance processes (see Chapter 7). The dilemma facing a university, and indeed the sector as a whole, is that without a national or regional framework providing general credit rating, individual awarding bodies can play one institution off against another seeking the best deal and then confronting institutions with a fait accompli, daring the university to weaken its recruiting position by under rating the candidate with a particular award. (The university willing to give a BTEC, HND 240 credits being a more attractive proposition to a student or employer who might be paying than one willing to grant only 180).

We believe that credit-based modularity, unlike traditional time-based HE, provides the tools to help arrive at logical equitable decisions about equivalence. Learning outcomes can be easily mapped against those of comparable awards and thus an equivalence against a volume of credit is relatively straightforward.