

Innovation and quality assurance in short course production

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Introduction

The Open Centre for Languages and Cultures launched in October 2020 with 16 new courses, each consisting of 16 weeks x 4 hours independent study, plus learning advisor support and forum, priced at £195 per course.

The research project explored the production process and its impact on stakeholders, identifying problems and insightful potential solutions, some of which have since been implemented.

What we did

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from all parts of the production process and with learners. This was viewed alongside quantitative and qualitative data from other sources, such as student feedback surveys.

Questions included:

What do you regard as your greatest achievement or that of your team?
Has it enhanced your CV?
Do you feel upskilled?
What training were you given?
Who supported you?
How effective was that support?
How could your experience of the production process be improved?

There are people in my other life who don't have access to online really, or they're not particularly computer literate, or even have other literacy issues. I mean, obviously people would be excluded I guess in that sense. (learner)

We're taking what I think we're now calling a postcolonial approach to culture, that's the contemporary challenge. (team member)

I felt that choosing a course with the Open University would give me quality. (learner)

Seeing it all come together quite quickly ... that was a satisfying thing (team member)

Findings from qualitative data

- The schedule for producing 16 courses in 6 months was extremely challenging.
- The courses launched on time and stakeholders, including learners, were generally satisfied with the outcome.
- Reasons given for its success included teamwork, mutual support, flexibility and a willingness to innovate.
- Willingness to work across boundaries and forge new working relationships across departments were also key.
- The process was, however, stressful for many stakeholders and due care for others' wellbeing is essential.
- The workload of all stakeholders was increased by systems and processes geared to core module production. It is often felt that the short courses are 'shoe-horned' into existing University structures.
- More flexible systems are needed for fast-paced short course production, and this requires active buy-in from the university as a whole.

Outcomes

Our research provided a high-definition snapshot of a rapidly evolving project. After the initial launch, the production schedule slowed to a more sustainable pace, while the strengths identified in our research (flexibility, teamwork, working across departments) have become more firmly embedded. There have been some improvements in the 'shoehorning' process. A ring-fenced rapid action team for short course production was suggested. Staff wellbeing and ongoing innovation regarding equality, diversity and inclusion remain central to all our work.