Critical Review

Taught Master's Students' Curricular Engagement in the UK: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract: *The current British taught master's programmes are highly attractive to both home and overseas students because of their short, intensive and well-organised features. This critical review provides a conceptual framework to explore the taught master's students' curricular engagement in the context of UK higher education. Based on the existing literature, two key concepts - 'higher education curriculum' and 'student engagement' are systematically investigated in the philosophical and pedagogical fields, so that the new concept in my research – 'students' curricular engagement' can be better clarified. The conceptual framework is an experiential inquiry-based engaging process which involves master's students' intellectual strategies, practical techniques and emotional applications. All three dimensions have mutual influences and the entire process is dynamically interacting with three larger educational areas: characteristics of master's programmes, learning styles and learning spaces. Taught master's students are expected to re-build their own academic identities through their curricular engagement. This theoretical model will be open for further revisions according to my empirical investigation into the actual students' perceptions about their curricular engagement.*

Contextualisation

As a result of the rapid growth in the number of taught master's students over the past fourteen years (HESA, 1995-2009), various debates on the issues of taught master's curriculum and student engagement have become significant in academia (Gill, 2007; Knight, 1997b; McEwen *et al*, 2005; Xue, 2008), but there seems to be little specific research on students' curricular engagement. Because the concepts of 'higher education curriculum' and 'student engagement' are the foci of my doctoral research, this critical review principally aims to provide this research with theoretical foundations in a broader sense of the foci in higher education in order to clarify the concept of students' curricular engagement. The main research question addressed in this research is related to the conceptualisation of curricular engagement in taught master's programmes in the UK context, the nature of which is supposed to improve the student experience and benefit the curriculum reform at master's level. Although the existing literature refers to many related areas, the scope of this review and theorisation are confined closely to the research topic.

## An Overview of Taught Master's Programmes in the UK

In light of the descriptions provided by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2010, p 3), the distinction between taught and research master's degrees in the UK is the proportions of 'structured learning and independent study'. The taught master's programme is defined as a type of curriculum that taught components should predominate even though there could be 1/3 devoting to students' individual research. Normally, its early stage involves course teaching while its later stage refers to a small research project or dissertation. Furthermore, such programmes can be specialised, conversion or professional broadening in nature (Thorne, 1997, p 24).

The length of taught master's programmes is usually 9 - 24 months in either full-time or part-time mode (British Council, 2009; QAA, 2010, p 3). The teaching methods comprise lectures, seminars and workshops with formative and summative assessments (Thorne, 1997, p 16).

The learning materials for such programmes are not strictly regulated by the corresponding curricula, but the course leaders may provide students with a relevant index or framework in handbooks (OUSU, 2009), so that they can have full play of their own initiative and creativity in the learning and research process. Most students will have a supervisor for dissertation assistance, but the allocation may vary, depending on the requirements of the specific subjects.

At the beginning of the 1980s, British higher education experienced a transition from elite higher education to mass higher education (Williams, 1997). The expansion of undergraduate education developed into a 'fast stage' then even though it started since the 1960s when the *Robbins Report* (1963) introduced an expansion in university provision for all those qualified candidates. According to the statistics of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 1995-2009), in 1995, there were only 211,841 full-time undergraduates, but this number rose to 380,915 in 2002. By the end of 2008, there were already 297,235 students who had obtained their first degrees. This number has increased dramatically since 1995. The immediate consequence was the fast expansion of taught master's education (Watson and Amoah, 2007, p 39). Moreover, the University Grants Committee and the Research Councils and the Public Accounts Committee have already actively encouraged the development of taught master's courses in the development of postgraduate education at the end of the 1980s (Biggs, 1998, p 202; Stevens, 2004). Under the context of social development and the guidance of government policies, taught master's programmes become increasingly significant in British postgraduate education and its rapid development was inevitable.

Currently, British taught master's programmes are highly attractive to both home and overseas students because of the short, intensive and well-organised features (Reichert and Tauch, 2003; Kehm and Teichler, 2006; Xue, 2008). According to the latest data from HESA (see Figure 1), the number of students who obtained their British taught master's degrees has increased by 19.8 per cent over the past five years. In addition, compared with undergraduate and doctoral programmes, there is some uncertainty surrounding the issues of students' curricular engagement in such programmes. In terms of the curriculum nature, undergraduate programmes involve much foundational disciplinary knowledge learning while doctoral programmes have a clear focus on specific topic studies. The students' curricular engagement in these two types of programmes is obviously in stages due to a relatively long period of study (at least 3 years). However, unlike them, taught master's programmes seem like a 'condensed package', disputable in their disciplinary classification, balance between teaching and research, as well as professional concerns (Knight, 1997b, p 1). Due to the short learning time (usually 12 months in full-time) (QAA, 2010), this 'condensed package' brings an 'intensive status' for the corresponding student engagement. This influence is not staged but holistic. For instance, Xue (2008, p 179) claims that students in such programmes may lack 'a fully integrated research experience due to a busy schedule of stressful study and exams'.
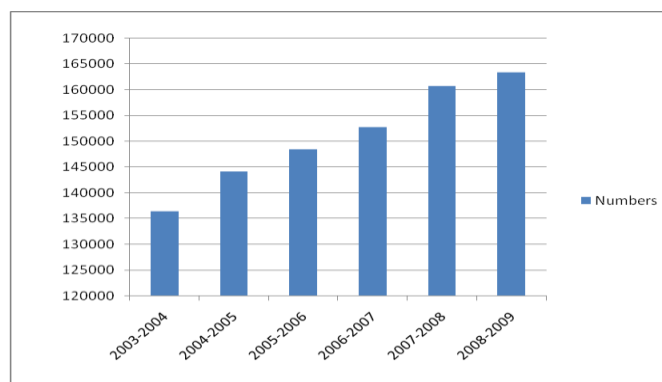
Source: HESA (1995-2009) *Students and Qualifiers Data Tables*
Note: The degrees do not include PGCE and other postgraduate diplomas.

Figure 1. The number of students who obtained the taught higher degrees (2004-2009)

However, even though the number of students in such programmes is experiencing a large-scale increase, the students' actual curricular engagement is seldom regarded as an academic research topic. In fact, the student boom and the intensive curriculum of taught master's programmes imply that the students' curricular engagement can be new space for further investigation and proven significant in the academia of higher education. Its nature seems indispensable for both theoretical and empirical exploration.

Curriculum: A Problematic Term in Higher Education

Investigating the nature of taught master's students' curricular engagement requires an initial exploration on the term 'curriculum'. According to Frankel and Reeves (1996, p 1), the word *curriculum* is originally Latin from the 1600s, translated as *course*. Then it gradually evolved to '*a list of courses offered by an educational establishment*' or '*plan of activity*'. These constantly changing connotations indicate that the concept of curriculum is heterogeneous in nature. In order to 'purify' this definition, many scholars in education and social science have engaged their research in curriculum. Lawton first provided a broad definition of curriculum. He (1975, p 6) thinks that the curriculum can extend to 'all aspects of human lives', which is 'a selection from the culture of a society'. Compared with him, Taylor and Richards (1985) claim that the simplest definition of the curriculum is 'what ought to be taught', which can be regarded as a restricted definition of curriculum in the contemporary world. There are also some other definitions going further. For instance, Squires (1990) indicates that the curriculum should refer to the totality of what students experience during their learning programmes.

In higher education, from another facet, knowledge, regarded as the 'origin' of curriculum, should be carefully examined before further probing into the curriculum term. Higher education is experiencing a transformation of knowledge. Delanty (2001, p 12-13) has argued that the university is 'a site of mediation between academic knowledge production and cultural cognition'. In the view of postmodernism, knowledge is a flowing and dynamic system of communication and discourse because it is 'constantly changing through experience and learning' (Mclnerney, 2002, p 1010). These two arguments provide higher education with a new perspective and indicate its meaning and value. For the pedagogical issues, the most important enlightenment for solution is that obtaining knowledge is an actively constructive process. As the carrier of teaching and learning, knowledge is transformational in nature, so the philosophy in higher education requires being re-built based on course designers, lecturers and students' consensus. This rebuilding will reconceptualise the contemporary concepts in the development of the curriculum in higher

education from the aim, teaching methods, and assessment to the expected student engagement. On the one hand, it requires that the curriculum in higher education should be open, unite, interrelated and human-caring (Slattery, 2006). The flexibility of British higher education curriculum is such a typical example. On the other hand, Habermas (1976) has indicated that the concept of truth is constituted by the consensus, so the communication and co-operation between curriculum designers and students needs to be paid more attention in the future reform of curriculum in higher education.

Despite the fact that the 'connotations' and the 'origin' of the curriculum continually vary, this term is generally understood but not broadly mentioned in UK higher education, due to its flexibility in teaching arrangements and learning contents (Light and Cox, 2001). Taylor and Richard (1985) argue that the curriculum is a missing term in the studies of higher education. Squires (1990, p 3) points out that the term 'curriculum' is usually replaced by *courses* or *programmes* in the higher educational institutions. The system of British higher education is usually described in institutional rather than curricular terms. Barnett and Coate (2005) also argue that the term 'curriculum' is rarely mentioned in official educational reports. Hitherto, existing research on the UK higher education curriculum is relatively small (Biggs, 1998; Tight, 2003, p 75; Barnett and Coate, 2005, p 24). However, this 'hidden term' might be a mystery and significant to 'imagine' (Barnett, 2010a) in higher education. The reason is that it not only involves the ontological aim of higher education, but also creates a direction for producing a student's experience at universities.

Engaging Students: Issues of Curriculum Design

Knight (1997a) and McEwen (McEwen *et al*, 2005) indicate that curriculum consistency is difficult to determine at the taught postgraduate level because taught master's learning involves a substantial number of advanced learning elements than undergraduate learning. Other similar studies (Knight, 1997b; Kneale, 2005) also mentioned corresponding points, but did not provide an in-depth interpretation. To some extent, this presents evidence that there seemed limited discussion about the overall pattern of the taught master's curriculum design, let alone how it engages students. Even so, *'when god closes a door, somewhere he opens a window'.* These studies, as if by prior agreement, all mentioned the undergraduate curriculum as a foundation of taught master's curriculum, which naturally drove me to look at the corresponding research on undergraduate curriculum. Among them, Squires' three-dimensional framework (1990) and Barnett and Coate's three-dimensional schema (2005) connect the curriculum design with student engagement, and contributed much to the conceptual framework of my doctoral research.

Based on the results of previous studies, Squires' framework (1990, p 31) encapsulates three aspects to describe the undergraduate curriculum. In this framework, knowledge, culture and student development are defined as the three dimensions of the curriculum (see Figure 2). All relevant factors were categorised into the three aspects as long as they had the potential to influence the curriculum design.
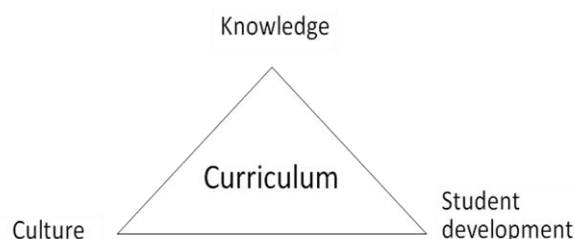
Sources: Squires (1987) *The Curriculum Beyond School* /
Squires (1990) *First Degree: The Undergraduate Curriculum*

Figure 2. Squires' three-dimensional framework

The curriculum as knowledge is regarded as the most important dimension of the three, widely existing in all aspects of higher education. The curriculum as knowledge includes stance, mode and disciplines (p 53). He believes that the curriculum in higher education should be based on or at least draw from coherent bodies of knowledge which go beyond mere skill and are capable of being explicated and taught at a higher level. As for the culture dimension, the term 'culture' is at variance with common sense. Squires understands it as the connotation of the way of a person's life, having the potential influence of the curriculum on ideas, beliefs values and habits. The influence is practically related to student specific expertise, general ability, personal qualities and the acquisition of basic employment skills (Squires, 1990, p 155). The last dimension is student development, which carries another important weight. Squires believes that the attributes or activities of development should be fundamental to the notion of 'student'. In other words, it is expectedly the development of the student rather than that of other identities. In general, this framework summarises all the important educational elements in the curriculum design and especially stresses the vital status of students.

Fifteen years later, Barnett and Coate (2005, p 3) presented a similar model related to the curriculum design in higher education. Compared with Squires, it is much more dynamic because they formally introduced student engagement. They argue that 'a curriculum is a matter of engaging students in three dimensions of knowing, acting and being' (2005, p 48) (see Figure 3). Students are expected to be engaged in these three domains by the curriculum. Knowing is the knowledge engagement. Acting refers to students' various skills. Being is a philosophical reflection of students' own features and abilities as a 'human being'. The three dimensions reflect three sorts of space for student engagement: epistemological, practical and ontological space.
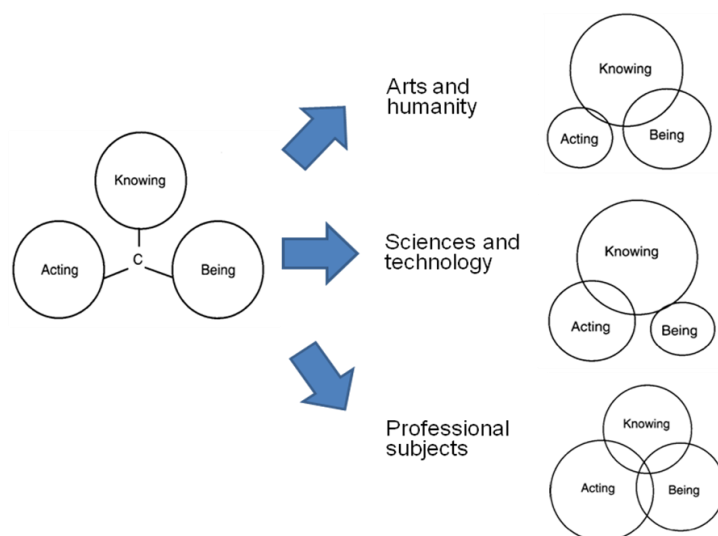
Source: Barnett and Coate (2005) *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education*, p 70-73

Figure 3. Barnett and Coate's three-dimensional patterns

In their patterns, the three domains - knowing, acting and being should be ideally more or less of equal weight but unequal in reality. They claim that the circles should overlap to some extent but should not coincide. Different courses will perhaps particularly emphasise one domain. Barnett and Coate displayed the model into diverse subject areas (2005, p 73-77), and claim that they did not always play equal in different disciplines. For example, in arts and humanities subjects, the knowledge domain forms a dominant component of the curriculum, while the acting part accounts for the smallest part. Meanwhile, a curriculum should also provide collective space to the students for mutual engagement in order to improve their own development through the power of education.

These two models are innovative and proved to be reasonable in their theoretical inquiries on how to engage students, but there are still two aspects worth further discussions. First and foremost, the two models are established based on undergraduate curriculum. Their suitability in the taught master's curricula requires further assessment because the applying conditions may vary. Furthermore, due to the relatively short programme length, taught and research proportions, academic or professional tendency (QAA, 2010), as well as the disciplinary features (Thorne, 1997) in programmes, the methodology of subject categorisation may be problematic. Squires (1987) employed the most familiar dichotomous grouping - 'arts' and 'science'. Based on this grouping, Barnett and Coate (2005) added a concept of 'professional' into the categorisation of subject areas. This 'adjunction' proves the value of such a simple dichotomy questionable, but their classification still cannot be regarded as 'conclusive'. Its deficiency is reflected by the issue of categorising the specific programmes in the same subject. For example, some music programmes have both arts and professional characteristics. The corresponding curricula seem to be unlikely classified into only one subject area.

In addition, neither Squires' nor Barnett and Coate's model really takes the students' initiatives as their standpoint even though their frameworks refer to student engagement. They discuss student learning mainly from a curriculum designer's perspective. Although Squires (1990) mentioned the concept of 'student development' and Barnett and Coate (2005) introduced the term 'engagement' into their typology, providing pedagogical space for student learning, but such engaging seems a bit 'passive'. The reason is that they still consider the curriculum as the major subject which can 'engage' the student element of

higher education. Although in the recent book of Barnett (2007), he mentions that students have their own dispositions and qualities to engage the uncertain world and higher education should cultivate and stimulate students' 'will' to learn in this 'liquid world', in fact, there might be an inconsistency in designers and students' ideas on curricular engagement. Students are expected to engage with their curriculum via a unique 'student way', which may be rational, practical and / or emotional.

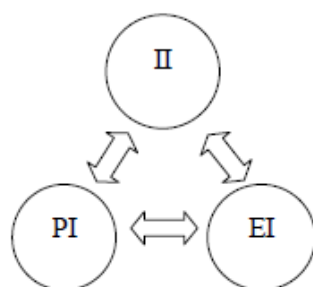## Students' Curricular Engagement

Burslem (2004) has announced that students were a key group in examining the curricula in higher education. Their engagement is highly related to their learning efficiency and emotional development. In terms of the constructivist view, the individual cognitive development is always in a 'balanced - imbalanced - rebalanced' dynamic process. Knowledge is no longer a static result, but an active constructive process. Piaget (1972) points out that human learning is an interactive process of their internal structures and the external stimuli. This is because when the individual is facing external information, his / her original experience and intellectual structure are different, and thus its cognition results will vary. This point lays a foundation for my investigation into students' curricular engagement.

Literally, 'engaging' means 'to take part or become involved in an activity' (Longman, 2000, p 472). In the educational context, student engagement has been considered a buzzword (Kenney, Dumont and Kenney, 1995, p 37). It is frequently described as a student's involvement in routine educational activities (Chapman, 2003). On the one hand, it reflects that the love of learning may lead to students' lifelong learning (Rooke, 2003, p 233). On the other hand, it shows students' willingness to interact with the learning surroundings in order to proceed a life-wide learning (Barnett, 2003; 2010b). The previous discussions of the curriculum design imply that it is the very time to highlight the students' initiative engagement with their curricula. There are many convictive reasons to conduct research on students' curricular engagement. The first is that the knowledge and skills listed on the curriculum have a direct impact on students' employability. It is also an opportunity to see the return of their investment in education, which is a result of economic value. Furthermore, this engagement can link to the 'hidden curriculum' (Myles, Trautman and Schelvan, 2004), which may be conducive to certain types of students for their success. Its powerfulness cannot be ignored or taken for granted. The last is that the students' emotional maturity and their personalities are influenced by higher education. In short, under this condition, as Squires (1990) pointed out, how the curriculum assists the students' development is vital for investigation.

Curricular engagement describes a mutually beneficial collaboration of all stakeholders in higher education (Campbell, 2008, p 23). As indicated before, there might be an inconsistency in lecturers and students' perspectives about students' curricular engagement. Miller's research may shed some light on this point. He (1977, p 55) advocates that student engagement in learning is important, but he points out that staff and students in higher education have very diverse ideas about its meaning. According to him, lecturers think that student curricular engagement involves not only a series of abilities, such as understanding, problem-solving, critical thinking, decision making, communication and technical skills, but also interest and enthusiasm. On the contrary, students stress more on 'routine' learning activities like attending classes, doing set reading, and talking to their peers and staff. In addition to Miller's findings, students may have their own preferences in learning. For example, as a sort of communication, discussion in class may have little meaning for passive or unresponsive students, but we cannot simply conclude that they do not participate in class. All of these will be put into 'learning styles' for further discussion.

If we consider the goal of higher education as the reason of curriculum design, students' curricular engagement should be regarded as the outcome of higher education, involving

both elements of student and curriculum. It should not be limited in classroom activities, like the things at primary and secondary schools, but as an experiential and inquiring process. This process should comprise intellectual strategies, practical techniques and emotional applications in order to actively respond to the 'engaging call' of the curriculum design from students' own standpoints, not just a 'will', but a real 'action'. I agree with Rowland (2006) about the term 'inquiry', and believe that it can be the best term to help figure out the appropriate relationship between the engaging approaches. With these in mind, an inquiry-based model was developed to explore the students' curricular engagement (see Figure 4).

(II: intellectual inquiry, PI: practical inquiry, EI: emotional inquiry)

Figure 4. An inquiry-based model of students' curricular engagement

This model consists of three approaches: intellectual inquiry, practical inquiry and emotional inquiry. Each approach can also be divided into several components. Intellectual inquiry is a cognitive process of curricular engagement but may not be necessarily theoretical. It includes receptive (eg, memory), processing (eg, comprehension), and productive (eg, problem solving) strategies. Practical inquiry is a behavioural process of curricular engagement in practice. In this research, it does not refer to subject-based skills which are too broad and difficult to sum up, but only comprises research, transferable and employment skills. Although the two dimensions have been studied and recognised as the main approaches in student curricular engagement, I think that there should be another dimension in students' curricular engagement. That is the emotional inquiry. It is an intentionally emotional engagement with the disciplinary knowledge and the process of study, which refers to both psychological (eg, anger, happiness) and moral emotions (eg, responsibility). Because the complexity of the origins of people's emotions may distract the research focus, the reasons that cause different emotions will not have a detailed discussion in this research.

At Taught Master's Level: More Needs to be Considered

The three approaches have mutual impacts and the size of the circle shows their proportions in the engaging process. Due to various impacts from the complex context, the sizes of the three circles are assumed to have deviations in reality. This means that the inquiry-based model still requires further contextualisation based on a series of conceptual complexities. The first influencing factor is the characteristics of the taught master's curriculum. With respect to this, given diverse disciplinary features, such programmes can have a 'soft' methodology of classification with three dimensions: 'academic vs professional', 'quantitative vs qualitative' and 'teaching vs research'. The first dimension is according to the demand of a curriculum. The academic curricula focus more on the disciplinary theoretical explorations, while the professional ones are concerned more with the subject-related professional experience. The second dimension refers to the research nature of a curriculum. The quantitative curricula require much numerical analysis while the qualitative curricula need in-depth insights into the property of a subject. The last dimension is a reflection of the balance between teaching and research contents for curricular assessment.

The three dimensions can be integrated into a 'globe', aiming to provide 'free space' for taught master's programmes instead of a rigid disciplinary categorisation (see Figure 5). They are applied to various specific taught master's programmes instead of broad subjects. Any programme can be considered a 'dot' on the 'globe'. The programme length will be a 'catalyst' acting on the 'globe'. When the inquiry-based model is embedded inside the 'globe', the relations between its three approaches may be distinct because of different requirements by curriculum design.
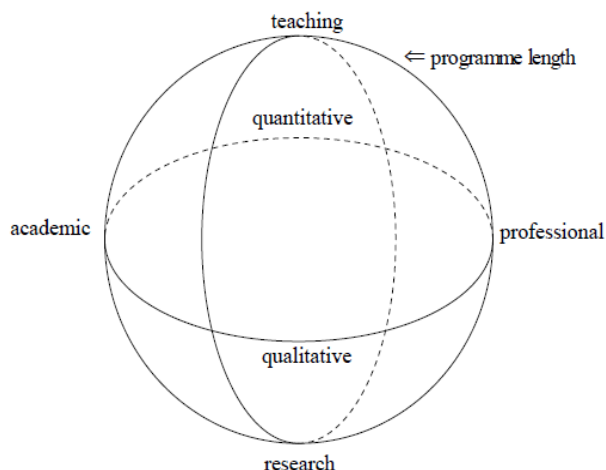

Figure 5. The methodology of curriculum classification

The second factor is students' learning styles, which should be a direct impact on curricular engagement from learner identity (CLIS, 2009). Because of the internationalisation and marketisation of British higher education (Wit, 2002), students at taught master's level are highly international (HESA, 2008). For this reason, there has emerged some racial stereotypes that are used to characterise home and international students regarding their learning styles (Turner, 2006). However, I doubt that these stereotypes may have the potential to cause some misleading conduct in teaching and learning. While investigating the impacts of students' learning styles, this research will also throw a critical light upon these charactering stereotypes.

The third factor comes from learning space, which is also described as learning environment (Temple, 2008, p 229). It is acknowledged as a mediating factor between its elements and students' learning (Wubbels, 2006, p 5). According to Coate (2009, p 276), the learning environment of UK higher education is still imperfect especially in staff support and the supply of learning facilities, for many international students, which is even added to the serious situation that they had difficulties in adapting to the new academic place (Gu, 2009). Therefore, the exploration of taught master's curricular engagement cannot ignore the impacts of learning spaces that universities have created for students, such as staff support and learning facility provision.

Based on the above discussion, Figure 5 can be further embedded in a 'triangle pool' of influencing factors displayed in Figure 6. In this 'pool', the student will act as an 'inquirer' to engage with his / her master's curriculum through this inquiry-based process while dynamically interacting with the three 'sign posts': master's curricular characteristics, learning styles and learning spaces at the same time. These important factors, of course, need to be further clarified in further literature review, but at this stage, I am confident that such curricular engaging 'voyage' may help students to build their new identities and form their individual 'being' (Barnett and Coate, 2005) at a higher academic level.
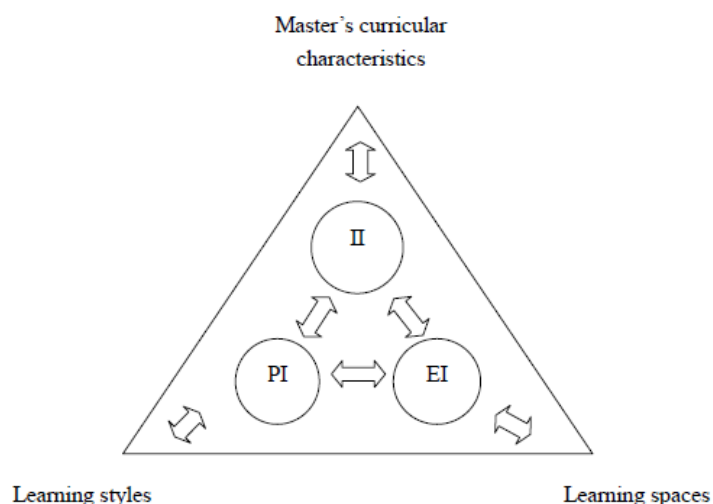
(S: student, II: intellectual inquiry, PI: practical inquiry, EI: emotional inquiry)

Figure 6. A schema of the expected taught master's students' curricular engagement

Conclusion

Various facts indicate that the development of taught master's programmes is a 'certain event' in the history of British higher education, so students in such programmes should obtain more concerns because their learning results directly influence our quality of curriculum and teaching. In this literature review, taught master's students' curricular engagement is conceptualised as an inquiry-based process with intellectual, practical and emotional approaches. This process is also engaging with taught master's curricular features, learning styles and spaces. The conceptual framework is a helpful tool to investigate the nature of taught master's curricular engagement theoretically and guides my empirical work. It is also open for revising or rebuilding, depending on the students' actual curricular engagement in reality. I hope that my research will not only contribute to the curriculum reform in UK higher education, but also be useful for those taught master's students to find their 'bearing' in today's uncertain academic world.

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