Places of Engagement

Heijnen, Armand, van der Vaart, Armand

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Heijnen, Armand and Armand van der Vaart.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76703.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76703

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2655002
The importance of evidence-based development of teaching and learning at university

Sari Lindblom and Jukka Kola

Universities will be faced with many challenges in the future. A significant increase in participation in higher education (Van der Zwaan 2017) has made the student population more and more diverse (Guri-Rosenblit, Šebková & Teichler 2007). The universities receive ‘criticism from the outside world’ (Van der Zwaan 2017: 5) because of the mass nature of education, the focus on efficiency and research output, and the lack of collaboration with industry. At the same time, competition in the higher-education sector has intensified, which makes the landscape of educational offerings for students ever more complex and difficult to judge in terms of quality. In this fast-changing higher education context, the evidence-based development of degree programmes becomes more and more relevant. The evidence-based discipline-specific development of teaching and learning is a key principle at the University of Helsinki, implemented to enhance the quality of students’ learning outcomes. Learning and teaching processes take place in real-life environments and are therefore very complicated in nature. Research can help identify factors that contribute to high-quality teaching and learning (see, for example, Gibbs 2017; Stensaker, Bilbow, Breslow & Van der Vaart 2017). Some findings from educational research often make sense intuitively and can even sound self-evident, but it is important, particularly in research-intensive universities, to generate empirical evidence to confirm teachers’ instincts (Lindblom-Ylänne & Breslow 2017). For example, systematic evidence has demonstrated that intrinsic study motivation, personal interest in studying, and
self-regulation skills are related to study success at university (e.g. Entwistle 2009; Pintrich 2004).

However, the development of teaching and learning cannot be based on previous experiences or on intuition only, as the empirical evidence often reveals complicated inter-relationships or even counter-intuitive aspects that need to be taken into account (Lindblom-Ylänne and Breslow 2017). For example, working while studying at university can both enhance and impede study progress and success depending on how skilful students are at organized studying and effort management and in self-regulating their study processes (see Tuononen, Parpala, Mattsson & Lindblom-Ylänne 2016). Research on university-level learning and teaching can very seldom give simple and straightforward answers because these phenomena are so complex in nature, but it is nonetheless necessary to systematically carry on collecting empirical evidence on the teaching and learning processes in different disciplines to find effective and functional study and teaching methods for each study programme (Lindblom-Ylänne & Breslow 2017). A strong research-teaching nexus is also important in order to ensure the high quality of students’ learning outcomes. Although in research-intensive universities, academics perceive the link between research and teaching as positive (e.g. Elen, Lindblom-Ylänne & Clement 2007), we lack systematic evidence on a beneficial link between active involvement in research and the quality of teaching and students’ learning outcomes (Hattie & Marsh 1996; Verburgh, Elen & Lindblom-Ylänne 2007). Engaging students in research and research-like activities can bridge the gap between teaching and research.

The University of Helsinki has undergone a substantial curriculum-reform process during which all bachelor’s and master’s programmes were redesigned on the basis of the following generally agreed main principles: (1) The creation of broad multidisciplinary bachelor’s programmes followed by more focused and specialised master’s programmes; (2) The enhancement of the employability of graduates by adding compulsory, discipline-specific course modules on working-life skills and competences and by increasing
cooperation between the university and working life; (3) Clearly and concretely defined learning outcomes in all courses of all programmes so that students are aware of what they are expected to learn, how their learning will be assessed, and how they should monitor their own progress; (4) The creation of shared degree structures, which enables the planning of individual study paths and the selection of course modules from different disciplines.

From the beginning of the academic year 2017-2018, the University of Helsinki launched 32 multidisciplinary bachelor’s programmes. The total number of bachelor's programmes was reduced to one-third to better serve the students and to enhance collaboration among teachers representing different disciplines. The 60 new master’s programmes are more specialised. Of these, 35 are international. The Centre for University Teaching and Learning supports the evidence-based, discipline-specific development of teaching and learning in the new degree programmes by allocating pedagogical support for teachers to develop new teaching methods and to monitor students’ progress and the quality of their learning outcomes. In addition, the Teachers’ Academy is a network of distinguished teachers who have key roles in their own disciplines in emphasising the importance of high-quality teaching in the research-intensive atmosphere at the University of Helsinki. The academic staff of the Centre for Teaching and Learning collaborates actively with the Teachers’ Academy, and together they form a task force to enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning at university (e.g. Hutchings & Shulman 1999; Kreber 2013; Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin & Prosser 2000).

Interestingly, the design principles described above are very much aligned with key points listed by Bert van der Zwaan in ‘The curriculum of the Future’, the last chapter of his book Higher Education in 2040 (2017). Van der Zwaan also emphasises the importance of collaboration between different disciplines. Offering more interdisciplinary programmes at universities is essential to prepare students to work in multidisciplinary teams in working life. The University of Helsinki also supports
the arrangement where teachers work in teams in which the teachers represent various disciplines instead of the traditional model where one teacher teaches one course. This broadens students’ worldviews and their understanding of the phenomena under study. According to Van der Zwaan (2017: 228), too little attention has been paid to the labour market and to the societal impact of university education: ‘[W]hen we bear in mind that university curricula tend to be supply-driven, that is, driven by academic traditions or lecturers’ interests; research universities in particular are not demand-driven in the sense that they respond to demand from society.’ At the University of Helsinki, the new degree programmes emphasise working-life relevance and the learning of working-life competences systematically from the beginning of a student’s university studies. We agree with Van der Zwaan that research skills, such as designing appropriate research and using the right methods, as well as academic thinking skills, such as critical evaluation, need to be given priority in addition to disciplinary knowledge. Because universities educate academic experts for an unknown future, it is important that students develop academic skills that can be flexibly tailored and modified to the changing needs of working life.

Van der Zwaan writes about a shift from curriculum-based education to personalized, customised education. This has also been an objective of the recent curriculum reform at the University of Helsinki. The possibility to tailor degrees to meet students’ personal interests and the opportunity to follow individual study paths inside the curricula help students to engage in their studies and support smooth study progress and the completion of degrees. Van der Zwaan further predicts a decrease in campus-based teaching in favour of online education. Even though the University of Helsinki aims to digitalize the teaching and learning processes, this will be accomplished by integrating face-to-face education with digital solutions. We consider digitalization as a tool to enhance quality, not a goal in itself. In addition, digitalisation provides students and teachers with more flexibility to organise learning and teaching without losing
the important face-to-face interaction. Finally, Van der Zwaan foresees that university education will become more and more modular in nature as the demand for lifelong learning increases. According to him, ‘modularisation enables each student to select individually those parts of the curriculum in which he or she is interested’ (2017: 234). We argue that it is important to separate studying for a degree from continuing education. In further and continuing education, it is possible to concentrate on selecting modules based on one’s own motivation and interest. However, when students are studying for a bachelor’s or master’s degree, it is not possible to only select courses on the basis of personal interests. Different courses of the study programmes complement each other, and as studies in specific programmes proceed, students’ expertise of the discipline will gradually deepen and broaden. This guarantees that graduates can successfully work as competent academic experts in different areas of society.

Bibliography

