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Does knowledge travel across institutional boundaries? Problematising the European Qualification Framework from the perspective of knowledge

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper discusses knowledge in the context of creating a shared curriculum between research-intensive and vocationally oriented universities of applied sciences, at undergraduate level six depicted in the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Curriculum knowledge was explored from the accounts of 26 teachers from four institutions in Finland. Shared curriculum initiatives created an environment in which teachers were obliged to negotiate and make explicit their approaches to curriculum knowledge. The phenomenon of blurring boundaries was approached with Bernstein's sociology of education. Discrepancies were found between knowledge and learning outcomes, and between knowledge as a negotiated artefact and knowledge as enacted in curriculum implementation. Focus on a harmonised degree, as stated in the EQF, obscures the question of knowledge. There is a risk of gaps in knowledge provided for students in the higher education.

Full paper

The question of curriculum knowledge is topical, as it defines the goals of higher education and the access it provides (Shay, 2016; Young, 2013). Formally, all higher education institutions (HEI) in the

European Higher Education Area have uniform degree structures and harmonised qualification requirements, as stated in the European Qualification Framework (EQF, 2018). To date, research on curriculum knowledge is scant; in particular, its complexity at the same EQF level at different types of HEIs has not received attention. At least three concerns emerge: First, if HEIs may differ in emphasis, either more academic or vocational, what happens to knowledge when curriculum collaboration crosses institutional boundaries? Second, if HEIs of different type are expected to have the same 'level of complexity', how is it interpreted in this case? Third, if knowledge is understood as a domain or column separate from other forms of knowing, does this limit our understanding of knowledge in the higher education curriculum?

The dynamics in the curriculum-making process and decisions on knowledge can be characterised using Basil Bernstein's (2000) 'pedagogic device' that regulates the potential discourse available to be pedagogised. It models relationships between three hierarchical fields: production, where new knowledge is created; recontextualisation, where knowledge is transformed into a curriculum with certain meaning potential; and reproduction, where knowledge is taught to students. The objective of the study is to explore what happens to knowledge in all these three phases when curricula were reformed to include partial sharing (80–120 ECTS credits) between a research-intensive university (RIU) and a vocationally oriented university of applied sciences (UAS). One case represents humanities, arts, and social sciences and the other science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The data is composed of thematic interviews for 26 teachers (287 pages) and curriculum documents (241 pages).

The divide between academic and vocational, context-free and context-bounded, and 'pure' and 'profane' knowledge has a long history in curricular debates (Young, 2008). I approach this divide with Bernstein's concept of boundary, referring to 'the social arrangements and practices whereby social groupings or domains of knowledge and experience are kept separate' (Atkinson, 1985, p. 27). To explore the knowledge boundaries across diverse institutional levels and contexts, I also use the concept of classification (Bernstein, 2000). The methodology is guided by Bernstein's (2000)

notion of the necessity of engaging theory with empirical reality. He draws a distinction between internal language of description, which refers to the language of concepts and theory, and external language of description, which refers to the empirical world. The following questions guided the analysis: how are different forms of knowledge legitimated when creating a shared curriculum between two HEIs of different type, and what kinds of boundaries and differentiation can be identified? Finding connections between internal and external languages required returning to the theory and data several times as intertwined processes.

The findings show that the HEIs have different foundations for knowledge. Official curriculum knowledge was formulated as learning outcomes but emerged as knowledge with symbolic boundaries and an invisible pedagogic order. The informants experienced pressure to change towards the knowledge practices of the other HEI. The current policy, where boundaries between HEIs of different type were weakened, could be depicted as a push for the RIU towards ‘profane’ knowledge. Simultaneously, this situation creates space for academic drift for UAS when thinking of RIU status as a site of the highest knowledge. The results of this study show that this drift does not include profound capability or interest towards ‘pure’ knowledge, which is a fundamental feature of a RIU, but those coming from the RIU neither expressed interest or capability towards ‘profane’ knowledge practices. Thus, the autonomy of education, a fundamental feature of higher education, became visible either in shared teaching initiatives, or in divided and thus invisible pedagogical practices (cf. Bernstein, 2000).

When knowledge structures are based on distinctive logics, it is challenging to put them into the same framework without affecting the complexity and coherence of knowledge. Degrees in both HEIs may benefit from blurring knowledge traditions and creating new forms of knowledge practices, but the best qualities of each are at risk of disappearing. One may ask if it is epistemologically realistic or even desirable to strive for the same level of complexity in different types of HEIs and degrees with a distinct orientation to curriculum knowledge. Instead of the naive and split use of EQF and learning outcomes, those responsible for quality assurance must avoid ‘the convenience of one-size-fits-all simplifications’ (Erikson & Erikson,

2019, p. 2301).

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