

## **Narratives of change in developing curriculum in higher education**

### **Introduction**

The European modernisation agenda for universities creates contradictory tensions within the academic communities. Next to different developing processes concerning governance and funding there are demands to develop curricula and learning paths. Curricula should be developed towards high-quality learning outcomes, but at the same time it is underlined the goal to intensify the study times. Besides, developing curriculum is a complex social process.

Higher education debate, policy formation and institutional developmental practices have not been engaged with scientific discourse concerning curriculum and its development (Barnett & Coate 2005; Trowler 2005). Numerous interpretations have been made of curriculum itself in the discourse on higher education (Mäkinen & Annala 2012). Curriculum has meant documented degree requirements, lists of the content of lecture series and the accompanying background reading (e.g. Fraser & Bosanquet 2006). Curriculum has been perceived as something to be produced in response to administrative demands (e.g. Coate 2009) or the political and economical interests from outside the university (e.g. Moore 2001).

More comprehensive understanding of curriculum is to see it as one of the key concepts in higher education by which the idea of higher education is put into practice (Barnett 2009; Barnett & Coate 2005). Barnett and Coate state that through curricula “values, beliefs and principles in relation to learning, understanding, knowledge, disciplines, individuality and society are realized” (p. 25). In this study, our approach is close to their view. We understand curriculum development as an intentional and dynamic process, revealing the values, beliefs and principles in relation to learning, understanding, knowledge and disciplines, and the cultural and political purposes of the education (cf. Pinar et al. 1995).

The academic community has generally been fairly circumspect, not only regarding the concept of curriculum but also its development, appealing to the autonomous position of the university as an organizer of teaching (Bulajeva et al. 2009; Leathwood & Phillips 2000). Curriculum has been seen to have its place within the context of school education rather than in the teaching in higher education. Despite the ideal of academic freedom and the lack of conceptual frames and research interest in curriculum development, there are implicit practices in planning, developing and carrying out of the curriculum (e.g. Margolis 2001). In this study, we focus on the early stages of this process, namely planning and developing the curriculum. The purpose of the study is to describe and analyze the experiences of the academics during a comprehensive curriculum reform. We focus on, what kind of narratives the academics tell about curriculum development.

### **The context of the study**

The research reported here is based on interviews with teachers who were involved in a process of curriculum change. In the period 2010 – 2012, University of Tampere, Finland<sup>1</sup>, launched a

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<sup>1</sup> Some 15,200 students are currently pursuing degrees at the University of Tampere. Every year approximately one thousand master's degrees and one hundred doctoral degrees are produced. The personnel number is about 2,100.

comprehensive educational reform. According to the university strategy, the change entails broad-based bachelor's programmes, streamlined administrative structures and improved opportunities for research and internationalization. The 40 departments were merged into nine schools.<sup>2</sup> These schools took over all the tasks of the former faculties and departments. The number of study programmes was reduced and there was an organizational shift from subject-based education to degree programmes. Students will complete the bachelor's degree in broad-based candidate programmes in which studies can be selected over unit boundaries. After the bachelor-level, students will be able to choose from a number of discipline-based master's programmes.

According to the strategy, the University of Tampere aims at "educating visionaries who understand the world and change it". The curricula for the degree programmes were to be based on learning outcomes. In its research, the university addresses the central issues in contemporary society. In the strategy, the basic values of the University are academic freedom, creativity and social responsibility, meaning that everyone has an equal right to learn, to acquire knowledge, to participate and to make an impact on society.

The implementation of the strategy began in 2011. In one and a half years, the new schools have been established and curricula for the new degree programmes created. The curricula will be brought into use from the autumn semester of 2012 onwards.

## **Data and analysis**

In the late spring 2012, when the curricula had been completed, we carried out semi-structured interviews concerning practices and processes in curriculum development during the educational reform. We asked to name interviewees from all of the nine schools. The data is comprised of 25 interviews. The informants were professors (12), senior lecturers (7), university teachers (3) and administrative staff (3). All the informants have been somehow involved in curriculum development, some as persons in charge, some as participants and some characterize themselves as bystanders. Our aim was to hear the narratives of change from different positions and perspectives. The informants were supported to tell his or her narrative of change from the position or perspective he or she had during the process. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

The analytical method of choice is narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Murphy 2009; Clandinin, Pushor & Orr 2007; Sandelowski 1991). Narratives are a portal through which the experiences of the world of academics are interpreted and made personally meaningful (cf. Connelly & Clandinin 2006). Narrative analysis is still in process. The fresh results will be presented at the conference.

## **References**

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<sup>2</sup> The nine schools are Institute of Biomedical Technology, School of Information Sciences, School of Management, School of Education, School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies, School of Medicine, School of Health Sciences, School of Communication, Media and Theatre and School of Social Sciences and Humanities.

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