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Implementing Outcome-Oriented Study Programmes at University: The Challenge of Academic Culture

Abstract

In recent years, the design of study programmes in Higher Education (HE) has been given considerable attention by HE practitioners and researchers. Today, a sound body of concepts and experiences on different realisations of Bologna-conforming study programmes is available. The same, however, does not hold true for questions concerning the processes of implementing and further developing programmes. This paper investigates the challenges related with implementation, particularly at universities. A first aim is to understand the specifics of academic culture and their significance for programme implementation and development. Elaborating on this analysis, a second aim is to outline the role of educational developers in this process, as well as the necessary competencies to perform such a role.

Keywords

programme development, disciplinary culture, curriculum development, educational development

Studienprogramme an Universitäten Outcome-orientiert gestalten: Herausforderungen akademischer Kulturen

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren hat die Gestaltung von Studienprogrammen an Hochschulen verstärkte Aufmerksamkeit erfahren. Mittlerweile ist daher eine Vielzahl von konzeptionellen Beiträgen sowie Praxisberichten zur Planung Bologna-konformer Programme verfügbar. Gleiches gilt jedoch nicht für die Implementation sowie die kontinuierliche Weiterentwicklung von Studienprogrammen. Der Beitrag setzt sich mit Herausforderungen der Implementation, speziell im akademischen Kontext von Universitäten auseinander. Ein erstes Ziel besteht darin, die Besonderheiten akademischer Kulturen und deren Bedeutung für die Implementation und Weiterentwicklung Outcome-orientierter Programme herauszuarbeiten. Ausgehend von dieser Analyse stellt der Beitrag zweitens Rollen, Aufgaben und Kompetenzen der pädagogischen Hochschulentwicklung dar, die notwendig sind, um solche Prozesse erfolgreich zu bewältigen.

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Schlüsselwörter

Programmentwicklung, Curriculumentwicklung, diziplinäre Kultur, Fachkultur, pädagogische Hochschulentwicklung

1 From designing curricula to developing study programmes

In recent years, the design of study programmes in Higher Education has been given considerable attention both by practitioners and researchers dealing with teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In the (continental) European context, this expansion of the design focus from courses to larger units of studying such as modules and study programmes is tightly linked to discourses around the implementation of Bologna-conforming study structures in HEI. Therefore, during the last decade, a considerable number of scholarly publications, policy papers and practitioner reports have dealt with questions concerning the definition of learning outcomes (often in the form of competencies), modules, and credit point systems (KELLER, 2006; MARIAN, 2007; SCHAPER, SCHLÖMER, & PAECHTER, 2013; WEBLER, 2005). In combination with research on modularized curricula and curriculum development conducted in the Anglo-American context, this leads to a sound body of concepts and experiences on different structural realisations of Bologna-conforming study programmes (BETTS, & SMITH, 1995; BURKE, 1995; JENKINS, & WALKER, 1994).

The same, however, does not hold true for questions concerning the processes of implementing and further developing study programmes at HEI. Often, curricular reforms within study programmes remain on the level of structural changes instead of sustainably influencing the teaching and studying practices in a way that supports the attainment of underlying educational goals (BRAHM, & JENERT, 2013; HUBBAL, & BURT, 2004). To actually yield educational effects, however, normative concepts such as problem orientation or deep-level learning need to become enacted through the faculty's and the students' practices of teaching and studying (HU, & KUH, 2002; JENERT, 2011, 2012b; KUH, KINZIE, SCHUH, WHITT et al., 2005). Experiences from the US context show that despite long-established traditions in continuous quality development of study programmes, initiatives often fail to permeate the practices of students and faculty (HARPER, & LATTUCA, 2010).

This paper investigates the challenges for the sustainable implementation and further development of study programmes in HEI in general and at universities in particular. Starting with an analysis of the characteristics of HEI as the organizational frame, a first aim is to understand the specifics of academic culture and what they mean for programme implementation and development. Elaborating on this analysis, a second aim is to outline the role of educational developers in the process of programme implementation and development, as well as the necessary competencies to perform such a role. Therefore, the article is structured along the following questions:

(1) Which challenges for the sustainable implementation and further development of study programmes arise from the organizational characteristics of HEI in general and academic culture in particular?

(2) Which roles should educational developers fulfil in order to support the sustainable implementation and development of study programmes?

The article unfolds around the core argument that the characteristics of academic culture(s) at HEI and at universities in particular need to be carefully considered when implementing study programmes in order to change the teaching and learning culture.

2 Setting the scene: Current concepts for "innovative" teaching and learning in HEI

The scholarly discussion on how to shape the future of teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE) can be roughly outlined as a "Shift from Teaching to Learning" (BARR, & TAGG, 1995). In order to accomplish such a shift, changes on different levels of within HEI are necessary (JENERT, ZELLWEGER, DOMMEN, & GEBHARDT, 2009). Teaching and learning methods on the course level as well as individual faculty's teaching competencies have been the subject of educational development for decades. In the wake of the Bologna reforms the level of study programmes has been attributed growing attention by educational developers, especially in German speaking countries. Where HE curricula had previously been designed by compiling various "junks" of knowledge provided by the contributing disciplines (and often remain to be so), "shifted" HE programmes set out by defining intended learning outcomes for students. Programmes structures as well as teaching and learning processes are then planned in a way that students are enabled to achieve these aspired outcomes.

Acting as an umbrella term, the "Shift from Teaching to Learning" is connoted with several other concepts guiding the discussion on HE: Learning Outcomes are supposed to go beyond reproducing factual knowledge. Rather, study programmes should aim at developing competencies, i. e. students' skills and attitudes in addition to knowledge (SCHAPER et al., 2013). To achieve such high-stakes outcomes, teaching needs to become more student-oriented, i. e. use insights about student learning processes in order to support deep-level learning (ENTWISTLE, MCCUNE, & SCHEJA, 2006). Thus, effective programme design should aim for a (constructive) alignment between (high-stakes) learning outcomes as goals, study structures and teaching and learning processes and, ultimately, assessment procedures for determining to which degree the intended outcomes have been achieved (BIGGS, 2003).

So when there are such elaborate concepts for planning study programmes, why is it challenging to implement and manage them in a way that realizes the intended quality of education? The following section will discuss challenges for the sustainable implementation and further development of study programmes that arise from the organizational characteristics of HEI in general and the specifics of academic contexts in particular.

3 Challenges for implementing outcome-oriented study programmes at university

3.1 The hard task of developing study programmes

Regarding the scholarly literature on programme design in Higher Education, only a small number of publications tackle the actual implementation, the management, and further development of study programmes. From the few reports available, it becomes evident that especially in university contexts, to influence the actual teaching and learning practices and not just change study structures is extremely challenging. For example, HARPER, & LATTUCA (2010) report that faculty resisted the incorporation of principles of continuous quality improvement which were aimed at improving curricular cohesion. HUBALL et al. (2007) discuss the challenge of integrating new learning outcomes into study programmes and, most importantly, get faculty to assume responsibility for achieving those outcomes. Presenting a case study, BRAHM, & JENERT (2013) show that even when working with a faculty that is strongly committed to their study programme, presenting pedagogical models like a competency framework turned out rather impractical. In the reported case, the idea of transmitting pieces of subject-related knowledge was so prevalent that introducing a competency-based model of intended learning outcomes proved to be extremely challenging. Furthermore, in a comparative study of four university programmes, JENERT (2011) concludes that both students and faculty perceived the progress of the studies as an addition of independent building blocks, i. e. courses with quite a low degree of cohesion and interdependence. Little communication among faculty as well as a low sense of responsibility for contributing to programme-level learning outcomes have been identified as primary causes for these observations.

The next section analyses universities as institutional contexts for implementing outcome-oriented study programmes. A reflection on the characteristics of universities and in particular academics as university teachers will provide a clearer picture of what stands behind the specific challenges for educational developers working on study programmes.

3.2 The academia as a challenging context for implementing outcome oriented study programmes

One of the major characteristics of universities as organizations is that their academic members, making up most of the teaching faculty, face an institutional double-bind: As researchers they are part of an academic discipline, each forming one or several scientific communities. For an academic, professional success is closely linked to being recognized in one's scientific community(-ies), publishing in acknowledged journals or books, attending conferences etc. Thus, an important part of an academic's career development happens within his/her "academic tribe" (BECHER, & TROWLER, 2001) which in most cases is not immediately connected to the home university. Usually, disciplinary connections stay intact throughout an academic's professional life while organisational affiliations will change several

times. For most academics changing organizations is even obligatory in order to get a tenured position. For this reason, academics have been described as being more loyal to their discipline than to their organisation (WEICK, 1976), especially in German-speaking countries where universities do not tend to have strong organizational identities (KRECKEL, 2006; MITTELSTRASS, 1991).

Academic disciplines have been characterised as individual cultures, featuring their specific bodies of knowledge, rules for doing research and – most importantly for HE – typical modalities for teaching (LIEBAU, & HUBER, 1985). The differences between disciplinary cultures can be huge, ranging from differing research practices to conflicting paradigms resulting in radically opposing worldviews. Education at a university has often been regarded as an introduction to an academic discipline (LIEBAU, & HUBER, 1985; MULTRUS, 2005). Scholars have investigated and compared different academic subjects (BARGEL, 1988; LIEBAU, & HUBER, 1985) regarding university studies as a process of being socialized into the respective disciplinary culture and developing its distinctive Habitus (BOURDIEU, & PASSERON, 1971; FRANK, 1990).

The important role of academic disciplines/subjects in HE needs to be thoroughly considered to understand the causes underlying the abovementioned challenges for developing study programmes. As a result of their strong disciplinary affiliation, university faculty tend to conceptualize teaching from the perspective of their own research discipline (HUBER, & PORTELE, 1983). Disciplinary socialisation does not only mean to familiarise students with the central bodies of knowledge and scientific practices. Rather, discipline-related Habitus comprises a whole worldview including aspects of everyday life such as political and cultural preferences, clothing styles etc. (BARGEL, 1988). Thus, acknowledging disciplinary socialisation as a main characteristic of HE means to accept that the academic discipline has a strong influence on how teaching and learning are conceived by academics (LIEBAU, & HUBER, 1985). Considering the complex institutional constellation of academic faculty – caught between disciplinary and institutional affiliation as well as between their roles as researchers and teachers – helps to better understand why implementing outcome-oriented study programmes is so challenging.

Designing curricula towards a portfolio of (intended) programme-level outcomes means a conceptual relocation of the role of academic disciplines and, consequently of each faculty member's position as a teacher: The discipline-focused view on HE regards teaching as a way of familiarizing students with one's discipline. In other words, teaching is a way of presenting one's discipline to an audience of potential academics-to-be (even if this might become true only for a fraction of the student body). In contrast, the outcome-oriented approach to HE puts individual courses as well as and the faculty's disciplines in a much more functional position. Instead of representing a glimpse of a disciplinary culture, courses are to provide a clear contribution to the attainment of the programme-level outcomes. As a consequence, faculty should select their course contents as well as their teaching and learning methods accordingly. Furthermore, developing outcome-oriented curricula requires faculty to synchronize and sequence their courses among each other in a way that supports outcome attainment.

At a first glance, all this may appear to be purely operational problems that can be overcome by implementing adequate processes for developing courses well-aligned to each other as well as to programme-level outcomes. Keeping in mind the important role of disciplinary affiliation for academics, however, it becomes obvious that adjusting one's teaching to programme-level outcomes can imply huge compromises and irritation. In fact, aligning a course systematically with programme-level outcomes as well as with other courses in the curriculum may require faculty to deviate from the "natural" sequence of knowledge as it is usually provided within his/her discipline.

For illustration, we may assume the example of a psychologist offering an elective course within a master's programme on strategic management. Hitherto, the course had been designed as a typical introduction to organizational psychology comprising a selection of basic theories generally assumed to be basic knowledge for beginners in the discipline. Concerning the course plan, this already provided a clear structure following the established organization of knowledge within the professor's area of research. Now this professor gets involved in a redesign of the programme and is asked to adapt his/her course both in content and in methods in order to contribute better to the major competencies necessary for strategic managers in corporate and public organizations. The programme manager asks to modify the course in a way that students are able to "analyse typical management problems from an organizational psychology point of view, contrasting the perspective provided by management studies and using case-based teaching for example". Our professor's first reaction may be to object this request as so far these students know nothing about organizational psychology so how could they solve real-life problems? If he/she takes the challenge seriously, however, this professor needs to understand (a) challenges managers meet in their work life, (b) how management studies as a discipline approaches such challenges and (c) how organizational psychology might contribute complementary or alternative perspectives. Some of the programme-level objectives themselves, being defined in the field of management studies may even conflict with basic assumptions of organizational psychology and thus lead our professor to object even more strongly. As a consequence, engaging in the process of redesigning the study programme, he/she is not only required to reflect his/her teaching beyond the limits of his/her own research area; ultimately, he/she might even be requested to subordinate the teaching-related habits of his/her own discipline to the needs of another subject area (in this case strategic management).

This short example highlights that for academic faculty moving from a discipline-centred to an outcome-oriented mode of teaching in study programmes is a challenge that goes beyond a mere change of teaching and learning methods. Rather, to really align one's teaching to programme-level learning outcomes means to reflect and challenge the (often implicit) teaching-related assumptions of one's disciplinary culture and to discuss such assumptions with other faculty members. In practice, such discussions about learning outcomes or the selection and sequencing of contents and courses may open up incommensurable paradigmatic questions that could be avoided as long as each faculty member stayed within the confines of his/her course.

With a trend to more interdisciplinary study programmes, the challenges outlined above become even more pronounced as the chance of having faculty across the whole spectrum of disciplinary cultures within one programmes becomes higher. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on employers' demands when defining programme-level learning outcomes that has become apparent in some approaches to implementing Bologna-conforming study structures exacerbates the apparent antagonism between traditional discipline- and outcome-oriented approaches to programme development. Such approaches may be perceived as a functionalist view on HE (cf. ALLAIRE, & FIRSIROTU, 1984), as the design of study programmes is driven rather by a reaction to externally generated demands than by research driven ideas and innovations from inside the academia (LIESSMANN, 2006; TEICHLER, 2000).

The next section discusses what the outlined challenges of academic contexts mean for the role of educational developers assuming the task of implementing and further developing outcome-oriented study programmes.

4 The role of educational developers: Bringing outcome-oriented programmes to life

Reflecting on the relation between disciplinary culture and the implementation of outcome-oriented study programmes, it becomes apparent why faculty often find it hard to participate in processes of programme development. As a consequence, the major task for educational is to reconcile the faculty's discipline-focused work identity with programme-level objectives that, at least partly, lie beyond the scope of each faculty member's discipline. Such reconciliation should ultimately empower faculty to feel in charge of their programme and it requires a moderation process on two different levels: As a first step, it is important to have the faculty buy in to the normative framework of the study programme, most importantly to the intended learning outcomes but also to other aspects such as the targeted population of incoming students or potential employers to be addressed. JENERT (2011, 2012a) calls this programmatic consensus the "Programme Leadership". As a second step, the ideal conception of the programme has yet to be realized at the "Programme Ownership" level. The term ownership implies that all relevant actors – programme management, faculty, and students – should understand the programme's conception, and align their teaching-related activities in order to actualize the normative guidelines.

4.1 Programme Leadership: Balancing multiple stakeholders to develop a sustainable conception of a study programme

Shifting from input-focused to outcome-oriented planning complicates the process of programme development as it requires higher engagement from more stakeholders than before: Usually, learning outcomes will try to meet the demands of various goal systems – academic disciplines, the educational mission of the HEI, potential employers, and society – which have to be integrated by addressing different stakeholders.

Recent years have seen a strong tendency to identify employers' demands in order to meet the needs of the labour market when designing study programmes (HARVEY, 2000). While employers certainly are relevant stakeholders, it is necessary to balance their demands with the perspectives of other stakeholders. Recurring to the importance of disciplinary cultures, it is crucial to empower faculty to negotiate and interpret how external expectations and requirements towards a study programme should be dealt with. In fact, when not presented in the form of a dogma, educational developers can use external demands effectively as a starting point for discussing programme design among the faculty.

Another party relevant for this negotiation process are the students: Their interest for a programme depends on how relevant they regard the learning outcomes for their personal development. Yet, this does not imply to treat students as customers and profile study programmes primarily to meet students' career expectations (REINMANN, & JENERT, 2011). How faculty perceive themselves in relation to students' expectations and demands is also an element to be defined on the programme leadership level.

Finally, the management board or various committees within the university, departments etc. may be important stakeholders for programme design: Institutional expectations towards a programme could address economic factors, e. g. in order to attract a certain number of students within a given amount of resources or to contribute to a HEI's reputation by getting accreditations, performing well in rankings etc. Political issues can be another factor influencing programme design, e. g. when overlaps between programmes should be avoided or faculty of specific subjects need to be included in order to fulfil their teaching loads.

Balancing different stakeholders' expectations does not mean to weigh each requirement equally: Some programmes may consciously choose to focus on research or to take a critical stance towards current economic trends. In this case, potential employers may not be defined in terms of private market corporates but rather as the academia or the public sector. Still during programme design, it is important to consider all the relevant stakeholders and assume a clear position. For educational developers responsible for programme implementation, actively moderating such a balancing act may be extremely challenging. They have to be able to understand the perspectives of different academic disciplines involved in the process, recognize underlying causes in case of conflicting opinions, and propose compromises accordingly. Furthermore, in order to moderate such negotiations, a certain level of authority and confidence in academic environments is also necessary (JENERT, 2012b; JENERT, & BRAHM, 2010).

4.2 Programme Ownership: Empowering faculty to create a desirable teaching and learning culture

A question that has rarely been tackled so far is how educational developers, respectively programme managers can manage interaction among faculty in a way to create a teaching and learning culture that supports students in attaining previously defined programme-level outcomes. Even having well-described programme-level outcomes accepted by the faculty, this does not automatically lead to consistency

among the individual courses. Without integrative elements connecting the various learning activities throughout a programme and linking them to the outcomes, students may still experience their studies as a more or less eclectic compilation of rather unrelated courses (JENERT, 2011). To develop a programme culture in which the students experience their courses to be interrelated and purposefully linked to superordinate outcomes (cf. AINELEY, 2008) communication needs to be well aligned among faculty. Contradicting information may unsettle students and contribute to the development of "hidden curricula" (JENERT, 2011). This requires a great amount of mutual information among the teaching faculty which can be supported by "classical" measures such as periodical curriculum conferences. Other curriculum-embedded measures include team teaching, or courses involving faculty from various disciplines or research-based learning (HUBER, 2009). Ultimately, the goal is to develop the teaching faculty into a "curriculum community" (HUBBAL, & GOLD, 2007) that assumes responsibility for shaping a coherent educational experience for students.

All in all, for outcome-oriented programmes to come to life, educational developers as well as programme managers need to develop a thorough understanding of their faculty's various disciplinary backgrounds and their academic work. Pedagogic models (e. g. the process of defining competencies as learning outcomes) need to be introduced in ways that do not leave academics as mere providers of solutions to externally defined demands. Rather, they need to be empowered to negotiate and reinterpret students' competencies from the background of their own research discipline.

5 Conclusion: Anchoring outcome-oriented programmes in the academia

Programme reforms in the wake of Bologna have not had the best press so far and criticism has been especially loud from within the academia (SCHULTHEIS, COUSIN, & ROCA I ESCODA, 2008; TERHART, 2005). Analysing the typical features of academic culture and relating it to the logic of outcome-oriented programme design allows for a more thorough understanding of why outcome orientation goes way beyond mere structural adaptations but requires academic faculty to engage in discourses that touch upon features of their disciplinary cultures and their work identities.

If faculty remain unengaged or resistant to programme development processes, educational developers should carefully reconsider how they present pedagogical concepts and models and where such concepts could be perceived as devaluing the contribution of the academia and research to HE. To master this challenge, educational developers as well as programme managers should not only be proficient in education but also know and understand the work realities (e. g. the modes of research and career paths) of the academics that make up their programme's faculty.

6 References

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