

Teachers' implementation of highly flexible Master's programmes within universities

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## **1. Overview/summary**

In this research the consequences of the changing composition of the student body in academic Master's programmes will be explored and its effect on the curriculum and the role of the teacher. One possible response from universities increasing student diversity is to make the curricula more flexible. Consequently, the role of the teacher will change. The focus of this research is to investigate innovative implementation strategies, applied to obtain a transformation of the teacher's role for flexible Master's programmes. The research question is:

*Which interventions and conditions foster or restrict teachers' implementation of highly flexible Master's programmes within universities.*

The theoretical framework contains both traditional and current views on (curriculum) innovation processes in (educational) organizations. These organizations are characterized by the presence of highly educated professionals. The assumptions that arise from the theoretical framework will be tested and case studies of good-practice in England and in the Netherlands will be critically examined.

In this paper an overview is given of the main issues concerning the research question. Therefore a short problem- and the contextanalysis is presented leading to an initial theoretical framework.

## **2. Background**

The reason behind this research question is that universities have undergone many changes in regard to the (teaching) relationship with their students. Five to ten years ago the student profile in the universities was homogeneous because students came directly from secondary education and, as a consequence, they

were roughly the same age with closely comparable social economic backgrounds. This situation has changed considerably. Universities are confronted with a growing diversity of the student population.

This change in student profile is related to several developments in society. The first important one is the changing character of higher education. This character has developed from education for an elite group to education for the masses (Light, 2002; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). As a consequence, more students come to universities, especially those from groups, which were traditionally less active, for example women, cultural minorities and students from social-economic lower backgrounds. Closely related to this changing character is the second development towards *life long learning*. The underlying idea of life long learning is that current knowledge runs quickly out of date, and consequently there is a constant need for updating that knowledge (Morrison, 2003). Lifelong learning anticipates to that need. For that reason, there is an increase in students who decide to study at later age, mainly in combination with work. In addition to these two developments are the growing internalisation and the trend to globalisation which contribute to the diversity of the student population (Van der Wende, 2002). Due to improvements in mobility it is easier for students to do (a part of) their study abroad. In most of the European countries studying abroad is stimulated by a governmental policy and is often supported by funds or grants.

Because of the changing student profile it is necessary for universities to pay more attention to the changing learning needs of students. Moreover, universities are getting more and more competition, especially from new commercial providers of higher education. Because of cut backs in governmental expenses on higher education most of the universities are forced to join this competition. The new providers act globally, stimulated by the use of information technology. In comparison with the traditional universities Ruch (2001) concludes that these providers can quickly anticipate to a changing need in the market. Besides that, they are very client oriented and cost-efficient (Ruch, 2001). Although European

universities can take advantage of the joint cooperation in the European Higher Education Area, it can still be difficult to compete with these new providers.

### **3. The consequences of the changing student profile**

This growing awareness can be seen in attempts to change design, content and organisation of educational programmes within universities. These programmes are becoming more flexible. In this paper we mean that flexible programmes respond to the different wishes, (learning) needs and expectations of students. Nowadays there are more possibilities than ever to pay attention to the flexibility in programmes. There has been progress made in integrating information- and communication technology within educational programmes, resulting in giving more attention to the combination of pedagogical and technological aspects.

As a consequence, the educational programmes within universities are becoming more international, vocational and student oriented, supported by the use of information- and communication technology. This trend is linked with the relatively “new” groups of students that have entered university. These students come up with other learning needs than the traditional students. According to Levine (2003), for example, *life long learners* prefer affordable programmes in reachable places at a time that they can combine their study with their work and family. They hope to get the qualifications they have already achieved acknowledged. They are focused on personal development and the application of knowledge. In addition to this, they have a preference to work interactively with other students and wish to receive a recognised qualification/diploma at the end of their studies (Levine, 2003).

### **4. The concept of flexibility**

It is difficult to come up with one definition of the meaning of ‘flexible programmes’. Flexibility is a concept with many dimensions. What is clear however is that most researchers (for example Nijhof & Streumer, 1994) relate the concept with the system theory, in which an educational programme can be

seen as a system. On the input side of the system students can access to the programme and on the output side graduates leave the programme. The context is the society in which government and employers are acting. In this view of system thinking, flexibility is the ability of the system to react on the changing context. Noticeable is that flexibility can be focused on different system levels: macro, meso and micro level. The micro level of flexibility is the level between teachers and students. Until recently, this level has not had much attention (Clegg & Steel, 2002).



Fig. 1 Flexibility within the system theory

A more overall model giving insight in the concept of flexibility, and closely related to the system theory, is the model below. It shows the relationship between university and her main stakeholders students, employers, government, other universities and the broader society. In this model flexibility can be seen as decreasing the “distance” between university and her main stakeholders by changing design, content and organisation of educational programmes. The model shows the process, which universities are going through. The model shows on the left side a recent situation.

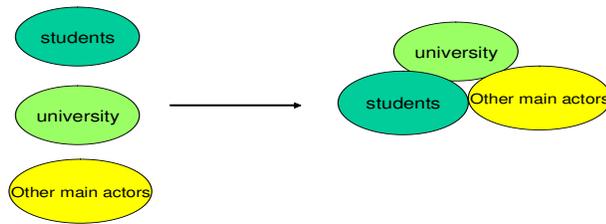


Fig. 2 Overall model for the concept of flexibility and the process towards flexibility

The students' influence on the programme offered was limited. The universities offered disciplinary based programmes, whereby the academic staff set the educational targets. There was little outside influence from the government or employers, as this would be seen as an intrusion on the educational system and academic freedom. One could describe this state as "living in an ivory tower". On the right side the model shows a situation to where the universities will develop. They will respond to the learning needs of students. In this situation the demands off employers and government are increased. Additionally, a growing influence of government and employers on programmes can be seen. However, this influence will remain minimal indirectly and the university will retain its educational freedom.

The possibility of the response on the right hand side has been discussed in the beginning of this paper. For example there is a growing need for sufficient highly educated knowledge workers to remain competitive in order to obtain a top position in the world. There is a claim for applied, usable knowledge too. Although governmental expenses have been cut down, the governments would like to have more influence on quality of the education offered. Furthermore, a significant governmental influence exists on university programmes within

European universities as a consequence of the European dimension, which can be seen in the implementation of the bachelor/master-system, ECTS and diploma supplements.

In this model different forms of flexibility can find a place, for example flexibility of pathways which refers to the different ways students can go through the programme (Raffe, 1994) and intra-organisational flexibility, which refers to the possibility for a student to move on from one programme to another (De Bruijn & van Esch, 2001).

### **5. Different changes: level and scope**

Universities can react on the changing student population with several levels of changes within programmes. A university can change a programme superficially, substantially or something in between. In educational and organizational literature about change a distinction is made between first order and second order changes. Recently a third order change has been added. The level of change can depend for example on the ambition level of a university, the starting point of a change or the possibilities and difficulties that come up when the change is going on. Related to implementation it is more difficult to realise substantial than superficial change and, as a consequence, more implementation problems can occur (Fullan, 2001).

In figure 3 several types of flexible programmes of universities are collected to show the differences in flexibility within programmes. Although several types can exist within one university most of the programmes are to be expected in the upper right corner, which is more delivery led. For universities this type of programme is a more common response to the diversity in student populations and quite near the existing situation. The other programmes, on the left side of the figure, are more demand-oriented programmes and are less common.

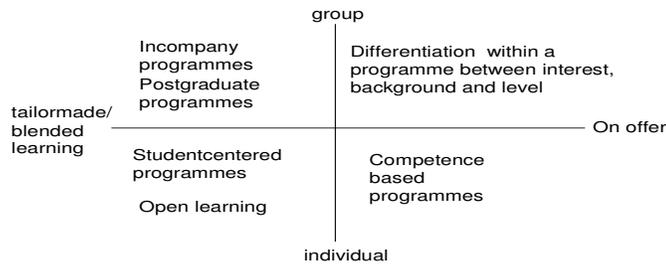


Fig. 3 Types of flexible programmes

The difference between the programmes on the right side and the left side is that on the right flexibility is found within the existing framework of programmes. For example, flexibility can be seen in differentiation in the student's interest, background, level and choice in form of examinations and the courses they will attend. For the students the starting level and the level at the end of the programme are fixed. On the other hand, the tailor made programmes start with the level, background and learning style of the students. The starting level and the level at the end can be flexible. For example incompany and post graduate programmes. These programmes are composed on the basis of specific student's characteristics, which result in a blend of learning possibilities (Van Veen & Van der Wende, 2005). Furthermore, students themselves can put a programme together in open learning.

Not only is the depth of change important in implementation, also it is the scope of the change. In a programme a lot of things will change. A useful model is Van den Akkers 'Spiderweb-Model' (2004). In this, several components of a curriculum are distinguished, which are closely related. What the components stick together is the rationale. According to Van den Akker focusing on one of the components in the change process can lead to implementation problems. People involved in a change process have to think all aspects over.

## **6. Strategies for implementation and the relationship with level of change**

Implementation of flexible programmes is possible in several ways and strategies. In organizational literature on implementation of educational changes three main strategies can be distinguished. Boonstra (2002) makes a distinction between 'designing', 'developing' and 'learning renewal'. Other researchers bring up more or less the same strategies (Marsh & Willis, 2003).

In Boonstra's point of view management has an important role in 'designing' changes. In 'designing', a plan is considered beforehand on the basis of a problem analyses and a possible solution. After this consideration the possible solution has to be implemented into practice. The persons who are directly concerned are standing outside the change process. On the other hand, 'development' as another strategy which is set by management, starts with a framework in which the directly concerned persons have the possibility to work in and come up with solutions. The change is phased and people involved in the change are taken along every step. The role of management is to intervene and steer the change process whenever this is necessary. The last strategy that Boonstra distinguished is 'renewal', which means that during the change process directly concerned persons undergo development alone or with others. They reflect on the problems they experience daily and give meaning to this in such a way that the organization can learn. The management role is to support this learning.

Although it seems otherwise, designing and development are, according to Boonstra, both planned strategies. 'Designing' can be used in situations whereby problems are not that complex. Real substantial changes cannot be reached, because persons who are directly concerned are receding. This strategy could be used in situations whereby a time pressure exists or when simple changes must be achieved. Only far reaching changes can be achieved with 'learning renewal'. This approach is useful in situations whereby problems and the future are unclear (Boonstra, 2002).

## **7. Factors that influence implementation**

Successful implementation of changes depends on context, curriculum and teacher characteristics (Van den Akker, 1998). Universities have typical characteristics which influence implementation of changes. This makes the implementation process different in comparison with other educational levels. One of the characteristics in the context is the culture within universities. This culture is described as not very change minded (Levine, 1980). According to Becher (1989) this culture is directly related to (disciplinary) research and less to education. He found that research gives prestige and can lead to power and influence. Change can disturb carefully built up prestige, power and influence (Becher, 1989).

In addition to this, academic staff are central actors in an educational programme. They teach the topics of their research. In a sense they are the curriculum. This close relationship can be seen in a situation when a teacher leaves the university, the course he taught would disappear from the programme as well. The teacher is because of this central role important for implementing change.

## **8. Consequences of flexible programmes for the role of academic teaching staff.**

Implementation of flexible programmes has consequences for academic teachers and for their role. Fullan (2001) describes three components that will change for them: their lecture strategies, the educational materials and their opinions about education. How and in what way the change will develop is not certain. In the literature on implementation of flexible programmes two possible directions can be distinguished how the role of a teacher will change: the teacher as an all-rounder and the teacher as a specialist. The first development is the one, which is closely related to the teaching and research tasks that academic staff have now but accents are put on specific teaching tasks. For example, when the teacher uses an electronic learning environment he has to prepare more beforehand the courses will be offered. Furthermore, he has to deal with the

different needs and backgrounds of the students in the same course. Another possibility for this teacher is to act in different programmes, for each group separately. The second possible scenario is the teacher as a flexible specialist. In this scenario task differentiation exists to get more flexibility into the programme. Developing a course and tutoring the students are for example separated tasks. Also the appointment can be flexible. This development can be seen in universities in the United States, where there is a difference between academic staff that teach on the basis of a (short) contract and a small academic staff that belong to the core with tenure (Finkelstein, 2003). These flexible appointments are comparable with commercial providers of higher education. These institutes are equipped to anticipate and to react on the changing needs of students and employers. Flexible appointments and task differentiation are common instruments to facilitate flexibility.

## **9. Conclusion**

The assumptions that arise from the literature are that the implementation of flexible programmes, which respond to the shifting learning need of students, if taken seriously will mean substantial change for universities. Implementation of such flexible programmes within universities can only succeed, according to theory presented, when attention is given to the specific characteristics of the teacher, curriculum and context. In this change process the strategy of 'learning renewal' might be successful. As a consequence, conditions and interventions within this framework of 'learning renewal' will help academic staff teachers to change their programmes into more flexible ones. In this change process the role of the academic teacher will change too.

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