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"Realising Potentials through Education: Shaping the Minds and Brains for the Future"

Individual and Flexible Learning Pathways in Teacher Education: Perspectives of Students and Lecturers

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Abstract

Demographic changes, globalization, and increased mobility are diversifying the student body. These global trends affect the University of Teacher Education Bern (PHBern), too (PHBern, 2017). The PHBern accommodated these trends by integrating individualization and flexibilization as key components in their new curriculum (PHBern, 2021). This approach fosters students engagement and prepares them for dynamic professional environments by developing skills like adaptability and self-direction. The paper presents the results from an ongoing project that studies the expectations, challenges in relation to the new curriculum from different perspectives, namely the management responsible for the new curriculum, students, and lecturers. The paper focuses on the results from the guided interviews conducted with lecturers (N = 9) and students (N=12). While the data-collection is currently still ongoing, preliminary results indicate, first, that the new curriculum is clearly perceived as being individualized and flexible. Second, students express putting their priority on optimizing their learning paths according to their availability and preferences (flexibilization) and less on focusing their professional needs and interests (individualization). The lectures, in turn, seem to agree that flexibilization and individualization requires the capacity of self-evaluating one's needs and requirements to set up a meaningful learning path; however, they express the worry that this ability is possibly not sufficiently present amongst the students. Third, that the new curriculum leads to experienced uncertainties amongst the students because of organizational issues that possibly hinder the new curriculum for developing its full potential.

Extended Summary

Aims

Demographic changes, globalization, and increased mobility are diversifying the student body. These global trends affect the University of Teacher Education Bern, too (PHBern, 2017). The PHBern accommodated these trends by integrating individualization and flexibilization as key components in their new curriculum (PHBern, 2021). Individualization means addressing students varied backgrounds, such as interests and life circumstances, to best support personalized learning (Baer et al., 2011). Flexibility within institutional frameworks further allows students to tailor learning paths that leverage their unique skills and circumstances (Brahm, 2015). The curriculum offers students substantial autonomy in shaping their learning paths and lecturers the freedom to design tailored learning experiences (PHBern 2021). The curriculum thereby aims to meet diverse students' needs and accommodate the growing desire for location- and schedule-independent study options and to foster students' independence, active participation in educational design (OECD, 2020), and responsibility for their own learning (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

A flexible, individualized study program enables students to acquire critical knowledge and skills while empowering them to make independent, reflective decisions in complex contexts (Schaper, 2012).

However, the shift to self-directed learning, which emphasizes active and collaborative engagement over passive consumption, requires students to develop self-monitoring, self-assessment, and self-regulation skills—skills that not all students may be inclined to adopt (Wanner & Palmer, 2015). On the other hand, lecturers play a pivotal role in shaping learning pathways by sharing their expertise through structured study options (Baumert & Kunter, 2006) and supporting students' professional development (PHBern, 2021). The question therefore is, if and to what extent students have the necessary skills or if they are willing to build them up and how the lecturers can support them in choosing their learning pathways.

This question will be addressed based on data collected amongst students and lecturers that were interviewed as part of the project “Potenziale und Herausforderungen von flexiblen Lernwegen an der PHBern” (FLePH). The aim of the project is to research the implementation of the individualized and flexible curriculum at two institutes of the teacher education (PHBern). First, guided interviews were undertaken with people in management positions of the institution (n=13). Second, rating conferences with students and lecturers were held (n=24). Third guided interviews with students and lecturers (n=21). To address the question what skills are required for orientation in a flexible and individualized curriculum and how the students can be supported, the paper will focus on the guided interviews undertaken at the secondary institute with students and lecturers.

Method

During the guided interviews the interviewees, lecturers and students alike were asked about their initial experiences, roles, opportunities, and challenges with the new study plan in relation individualization, flexibilization and the impact of the students' practical teaching experiences. Further, they replied to questions regarding their social, methodological, and personal resources needed to navigate or teach within the new curriculum, including desired support and qualities helpful or hindering in adapting to the curriculum. All data are recorded, transcribed, and integrated in MAXQDA and subsequently analyzed by using structured content analysis following Kuckartz (2018). Primary categories are deductively developed from the research questions and subcategories inductively derived from relevant statements by interviewees. Data coding is double-checked to ensure validity.

Results

While the data-collection is currently still ongoing, preliminary results indicate, first, that students and lecturers both perceive the new curriculum as flexible and individualized. The students interviewed indicate that the new curriculum offers the opportunity to select modules that align with their personal time constraints and preferences. Lecturers interviewed so far underline the freedom the new individualized and flexible curriculum provides for them, too as they can design courses and assessments according to their availability and preferences. Second, the data confirms the rising emphasis on student responsibility that necessitates strong self-organization skills. Third, a field of tension is possibly emerging regarding the conditions necessary for the successful implementation of a flexible and individualized curriculum: students express putting their priority on optimizing their learning paths according to their availability and preferences (flexibilization) and less on focusing their professional needs and interests (individualization). The lecturers, in turn, seem to agree that flexibilization and individualization requires the capacity of self-evaluating one's needs and requirements to set up a meaningful learning path allowing to develop the necessary professional skills. They express the worry that this ability is possibly not sufficiently present, especially amongst the bachelor students. The results indicate that possibly not the relevant reasons are guiding student choices. In combination, this would indicate that tailored orientation and advising possibly emerge as key factors for successful learning processes within individualized and flexible curricula.

Data also indicates that the positive aspects of the new curriculum are hindered and possibly obtrude because of challenging organizational issues and the abundance of information across various digital platforms. The fact that the information provided is not always consistent leads to uncertainties amongst the students and is time consuming, especially in the first year of the study at the expense of addressing questions around the professional skills required. This corroborates findings from second subproject, where organizational challenges were discussed in depth by students and lecturers in challenges, that were not anticipated by the persons who primarily designed the new curriculum (Winkler et al. 2024).

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