Designing Holistic and Sustainable Educational Development

A Case Study of University of Economics in Bratislava

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Abstract

The system of educational development in higher education should help university teachers continuously make their teaching more efficient in such a way that will lead to improved student learning. We argue that such a system should be based on at least three pillars, all leading to the enhancement of informed pedagogical conversations among teachers with the aim to improve student learning: educational development courses for university teachers, student feedback evaluations focusing on teaching and learning in the courses provided by the university and rewarding excellent university teachers. The article describes and analyses the important aspects of all the three pillars in a case study of the University of Economics in Bratislava and presents some of the intellectual outputs of an Erasmus+ project. Some of these outputs are already being piloted at this university in the academic year 2021/2022.

1   Introduction

Educational development in higher education enhances the quality of what universities do, mostly focusing on their primary purpose, which is university teaching and student learning. Felten et al. (2007, p. 93) define educational development as a profession dedicated to helping higher education institutions "function effectively as teaching and learning communities", which includes faculty development, instructional, academic, organisational development, teaching assistant development and the like. We agree with Amundsen and Wilson (2012, p. 90) that educational development should aim its actions mostly at enhancing teaching (adding that teaching should focus primarily on helping students to learn more deeply and efficiently). Several other terms are used in a similar context, e.g. academic development, faculty development, instructional development. However, we prefer the term educational development because we agree with Little (2014) that it encompasses the breadth of work that educational developers do on all levels (individual, programme and institutional) and for all key audiences (teachers, students, administrators, organisations etc.).

Although traditionally, educational development has been a practice-based field (Felten et al., 2007), a lot of effort has been made to find ways to make teaching practice based more on the latest results of educational research. The experience of educational developers, however, is that despite these efforts, educational research is often ignored by teachers, who rely more on local teaching traditions. Instead of trying to improve their teaching based on the results of research, they plan their lessons, teach and evaluate their students in similar ways over the years (Roxå, 2018, p. 67). One of the possible explanations is that micro-cultures in higher education play a very important role and their influence on university teachers´ behaviour is often greater than

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that of educational development activities (Roxå, Mårtensson, 2015). Scholarship of teaching and learning is often considered as a possible solution of this problem because this approach is based on the idea that "pedagogical procedures must be carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate directly to the subject taught" to "build bridges between the teacher´s understanding and the student´s learning" (Boyer, 1990). Even though Boyer himself did not invent the term scholarship of teaching and learning, what he described in his special report became an important basis for elaborating this approach in many other publications over the past three decades. Kreber and Cranton (2000) view this approach as ongoing learning about teaching and the demonstration of such knowledge. In more detail, Martin et al. (1999) describe three important prerequisites of scholarship of teaching: firstly, teachers need to study existing knowledge on teaching and learning, then reflect on their own teaching practice, and finally share the ideas about teaching and learning in their discipline publicly. Similar attributes of scholarship of teaching and learning are stressed by many other authors (e.g., McKinney, 2004; Healey, 2000; Hutchings, Shulman, 1999 etc.). Darling (2003) explains that this approach goes far beyond teaching superbly – scholarship of teaching and learning requires a focused inquiry process and regular self-reflection about the way one teaches his or her students.

Another important tool that seems to be powerful in influencing the culture of teaching and learning in higher education towards the continuous development of teachers is significant conversations (Roxå, Mårtensson, 2015) that they have with critical friends (Handal, 1999) about their experience in teaching. Pleschová et al. (2021) conclude that there are five crucial conditions that make pedagogical conversations really transform teachers´ conceptions and practice: cross-disciplinary participation, trustful relationships, conducive spaces, caring attitudes, and co-construction practices. The more of these conditions are present, the greater opportunity for meaningful change the conversations bring.

If scholarship of teaching and learning and pedagogical conversations with significant others are the main prerequisites of meaningful changes for the better in higher education, the university´s system of educational development should be built upon such activities that support and enhance these processes. In the other chapters of this article, we describe a system consisting of three pillars that altogether create a supportive environment in this respect. Thus, they represent parts of a holistic system rather than individual initiatives and they all lead to the sustainable development of university teachers for the benefit of their students and their continuously improving learning.

2   Developing a quality culture at a university

People are usually reluctant to make any changes to their life routine. Therefore, it is not easy to implement even small one-time changes in the university environment although universities are expected to be the source of new knowledge and ideas on how to make the world better. It is even more difficult to create a culture based on the idea of continuous improvement in higher education. Mårtensson, Roxå and Olsson (2011, p. 51) claim that teaching at universities appears "peculiarly resilient to all sorts of reform efforts made by managers and politicians". They argue that it is therefore important that the driving force for change should be the teachers themselves. Peer review as one of the most important impulses for improvements in their primary research field might serve as well while trying to support changes in their teaching. In a case study of Lund university, which is a research-intensive institution, they describe activities aimed at cultivating a culture of continuous improvement of teaching and students learning in higher education, such as pedagogical courses (modularised in order to support the progression of knowledge and skills related to teaching), project reports within these courses (directly related to the participants´ teaching practice), supporting the creation of a significant network of critical friends, departmental seminars and regular campus conferences on teaching and learning, reward schemes for excellent teachers with a scholarly approach to their teaching etc. Lund university was chosen by the Swedish government as the first university to pilot the implementation of scholarships for teaching and learning in a higher education environment to prove that this approach can form a framework for educational development that can be used at universities in general (Lindberg-Sand, Sonesson, 2008).

Sharing one´s experience with other teachers is an important element of scholarship of teaching and learning. Besides pedagogical conversations that teachers often have with people outside their profession (e.g. their relatives, friends etc.), it is therefore important that they are encouraged to share their teaching experience with colleagues in a form of conference papers, seminar contributions, discussions in workshops and the like. Another inspirational way is presenting and defending their pedagogical portfolios with the aim of being rewarded for their excellent teaching. An interesting example of how rewarding excellent teachers can stimulate teachers´ self-reflection is the so-called Pedagogical Academy at one of the faculties of Lund University where teachers

who believe to be good teachers with their teaching practice based on the scholarship of teaching and learning need to produce a pedagogical portfolio if they want to be awarded the distinction Excellent Teaching Practitioner (ETP). The portfolio is then assessed using three groups of assessment criteria: a) criteria to assess their focus on their students´ learning, b) criteria to assess the teacher´s teaching practice development over time, c) the criteria to assess the teacher´s scholarly approach to teaching (Larsson, Anderberg, Olsson, 2015, p. 119). For more details about the assessment procedure and reasons why this system is beneficial for the university, see Olsson and Roxå (2013).

3   Case study of the University of Economics in Bratislava

3.1   Analysis of the University´s educational development needs

The University of Economics in Bratislava (EUBA) belongs to the European Higher Education Area and the common European Research Area. In the framework of its integration, its **mission** is to ***provide a good quality higher education in all three levels of university studies*** in a complex system of economic and management programmes of study and selected programmes of study in the field of humanities and informatics, and to develop knowledge based on the freedom of creative scientific research in the field of economics, economy, informatics, humanities and social sciences, and thus contribute to the development of the knowledge-based society in Slovakia and in the European Area. EUBA´s **vision** is to be perceived and recognized as a quality, modern research university with international direction, which reflects social responsibility and prepares graduates who are able to react to the challenges of globalisation. To achieve the vision and build a quality development system, EUBA has created the Centre of Quality Assurance and Support. It is an all-university unit providing administrative, organisational and technical support to the management of the university, its faculties, institutes, departments and other units in creating, implementing, maintaining and improving the internal integrated system of quality assurance and support in all areas of EUBA´s activities.

EUBA also has the Department of Pedagogy, seated at the Faculty of National Economy. It primarily focuses on secondary school teacher training, but since 1997 it has also been providing educational development activities for beginner university teachers in compliance with the rector´s internal directive. In 2014, the rules have changed a bit and the new Internal Directive no. 3/2014 on Pedagogical Education of University Teachers at EUBA stated that successful completion of this course was a prerequisite for starting the habilitation procedure. The decision was made because the majority of beginner university teachers ignored the obligation to take part in the course. This proved to be a bad decision as it forced experienced teachers wanting to become associate professors to join the course originally designed for beginner teachers. Therefore, EUBA has recently decided to separate the two cohorts for educational development purposes. It has tailored two separate courses to the specific needs of each of the cohorts: one course for doctoral students with no previous teaching experience, and another one for university teachers with PhD. who already have some teaching experience but who cannot be considered as really experienced teachers (junior lecturers in the early stages of their careers as university teachers).

The analysis we undertook in 2015 revealed that the existing course was failing in a number of aspects. University teachers found too few incentives to attend educational development courses and those who were asked to enroll in the course by the heads of their departments usually came with a negative attitude and the course leaders needed to make a lot of effort to overcome that. Student feedback evaluations also signaled that a large number of students were dissatisfied with the quality of education at EUBA. In 2015, they revealed particular dissatisfaction with doctoral students who taught undergraduate and graduate students but were perceived to lack basic pedagogical competence. That is why the Department of Pedagogy started to organise special induction pedagogical courses for first-year doctoral students at the Faculty of National Economy in 2016. Students´ feedback on doctoral students' teaching practice at the Faculty of National Economy has improved significantly since the induction course has been offered. Also, the course graduates themselves appreciated that the course gave them solid foundations for teaching.

Courses for doctoral students turned out to be an excellent first step while providing educational development opportunities for university teachers, but, as our experience revealed, this is not enough. Our universities need to provide support also to more senior teachers and go beyond organising only the courses. To find out more on this, we have carried out a needs analysis in the area of quality teaching enhancement, which was informed by the following sources of data:

• "Edubreak" discussion meetings organised by the Department of Pedagogy between January and November 2019 – teachers from all EUBA faculties were invited to participate in discussions on pedagogical issues. Altogether four workshops were organised (some teachers attended even more than one of them). Each workshop took about two hours to allow enough time to raise and discuss topics of interest, including participants' worries and concerns. The meetings were organised on a voluntary basis and they were led in a friendly and trustful atmosphere to facilitate sharing of opinions and experiences. Altogether more than 50 teachers (from assistant professors to experienced full-time professors) attended the meetings.

• A survey among doctoral students from EUBA about their teaching development experience and needs carried out in February 2017 (with 49 respondents, 19 % of all PhD. students' population) – the survey showed that doctoral students appear to be most motivated to learn how to facilitate student engagement (motivation) and enhance critical thinking in students. They appeared to feel very little satisfied with their current knowledge and skills related to teaching.

To sum up briefly, the above-mentioned survey and findings from discussion meetings yielded four main areas of concern for doctoral students and university teachers:

1) *facilitating student learning*:
– how to help students to become active learners,
– how to increase their motivation to learn by using appropriate teaching methods and tools,
– how to make even lectures for large audiences more interactive and less boring,
– how to use modern information and communication technologies and online applications to make students more active in seminars or even in large lecture halls,
– how to keep lectures and seminars adjusted to the students´ needs continuously during the semester (based on students´ immediate feedback) etc.;

2) *making formally organised regular student feedback more effective*:
– how to make regular student feedback truly impact the ways of teaching and learning,
– how to significantly raise the number of students providing regular feedback on teaching and learning activities at the end of each term;

3) *appraising excellent teaching:*
– how to help teachers to enhance their motivation to improve their teaching,
– how to identify, acknowledge and reward excellent teaching practice;

4) *creating communities of practice:*
– how to support local (e.g. departmental) formal as well as informal discussions about pedagogical issues between teachers,
– how to create a mutual platform for sharing inspirational experience and examples of good practice within the university.

3.2   Design of the new system of educational development at EUBA

Following the results of the needs analysis and inspired by several higher education institutions from abroad, in 2020 we prepared and started to implement an Erasmus+ project which aims to prepare, test and evaluate a plan for making the development of university teachers at EUBA holistic and sustainable. We came to the conclusion that such a system should help to gradually change the culture of teaching at EUBA and to foster informed pedagogical conversations between EUBA´s teachers, thus creating communities of practice sharing inspirational experience and examples of good practice. Therefore, the new system should be based on a more scholarly approach to teaching and it should enhance continuous improvement of teaching and student learning. We have designed the system built upon three pillars which should altogether ensure that these requirements are met. The three pillars of the new system are as follows:

a) ***a three-level system of courses/workshops for EUBA´s teaching staff*** – these educational development activities should not only become a primary source of information for teachers on teaching and student learning in higher education but also stimulate their interest in the results of educational research in the area so that EUBA teachers are able and willing to improve their teaching based on the latest knowledge and recommendations that they will be able to study on their own and implement in their teaching practice. The knowledge should also enable the pedagogical conversations among teachers to be made in an informed way. The teachers should be able to make their own action-based research and publish its results in pedagogical conferences or seminars. The first two levels of courses have already been designed and accredited by Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) based in London and are being piloted in the academic year 2021/2022, the third level is going to be piloted next academic year. The system consists of these three levels of

courses/workshops:

1. an introductory course for first-year doctoral students: *Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (accredited under SEDA´S Supporting Learning award) – it targets participants with absolutely or almost no previous teaching experience with the aim of helping them realise at the very beginning of their teaching career that their teaching is done for the sake of their students in order to help them learn as efficiently as possible. The course introduces basic pedagogical and didactic knowledge and relevant related literature resources to the participants so that they can consciously choose appropriate teaching and learning methods in the seminars they lead. If the course is piloted successfully, we would like to offer this course as a compulsory part of doctoral studies for all so-called internal doctoral students, who must also participate in the educational process at EUBA as course facilitators/seminar leaders,

2. a consequent pedagogical course for beginner university teachers with a PhD. degree: *Teaching Skills Development to Improve Student Learning* (accredited under SEDA´S Learning Teaching and Assessing award) – this course is designed for those who stay at EUBA as regular university teachers in the positions of assistant professors after they successfully finish their doctoral studies. The course is currently not mandatory, but we believe that its successful completion could become one of the prerequisites for becoming an associate professor. However, it is designed primarily for the beginner university teachers who already have some teaching experience (but cannot really be considered very experienced teachers) and want to improve their teaching skills for the benefit of their students,

3. a series of workshops for experienced university teachers on up-to-date topics of interest – these workshops will target experienced teachers and they should tackle the issues they are currently struggling with. We are planning to create a cafeteria system of such courses, which should be regularly updated so that university teachers can always find some workshops related to their actual needs;

b) *a new system of student feedback evaluations* that will continuously enhance the quality of teaching and learning – in January 2022 we are going to pilot the system at one of EUBA´s faculties. Contrary to the existing system, we have shifted its focus from students´ satisfaction with their teachers to how they perceive various elements that influence student learning in the courses they take. What is probably even more important is the change in how the data from the questionnaires will be processed and dealt with. Instead of using them primarily as a managerial tool by heads of departments, they should be used by members of the student parliament to come up with suggestions for improvements in the courses, and student representatives should communicate the main findings from the questionnaires together with these suggestions directly with the teachers of each course and the respective study programme boards. This element should help to reinforce pedagogical conversations among teachers and it should support continuous improvements in all courses;

c) *a new system of rewarding excellent teachers* – this pillar of the new holistic and sustainable system of educational development is essential to keep the teachers motivated and willing to improve continuously. It should engage a number of stakeholders, including e.g. students, colleague teachers, institutional leadership (like departmental heads or deans) and the public. If the work of any teacher is to be awarded, such a choice should be supported by enough evidence and the selection process should follow unambiguous and solid criteria evaluated by a selection committee that is representative of the various groups of the stakeholders engaged. The evidence for the decisions about awards should prove that the teacher uses a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, and the evaluation process should include discussion about the teaching practice of the teacher (in order to foster pedagogical conversations).

This brief description of the main features of the new system of educational development piloted at EUBA indicates that if it is implemented successfully, it should help to change the culture of the university in the direction of high-quality teaching, leading to improved student learning and to a deeper knowledge of EUBA´s students.

4   Conclusion

The design of educational development in a university environment should address all the important elements that the latest research in this field attributes to the culture of high-quality teaching and learning in higher education, such as the scholarly approach to teaching and learning, frequent pedagogical conversations with the significant others, student-centered approach to teaching, etc. The way we have designed each of the pillars of the new system of educational development at EUBA reflects all of these requirements. However, it will be very important to assess the piloted versions critically with respect to the existing culture of the university and how

the new system can merge with it on a larger scale (not only in selected departments or faculties). Changing organizational culture is a long-term process that will require a lot of effort from all the stakeholders who participate in the various activities of the university. Good timing and proper communication of the meaning and meaningfulness of the proposed changes will be crucial for the successful implementation of the new system at the whole university in the years to come.

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